Mischief

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MISCHIEF

A hilarious tale of a rich, grum, middle-aged man's young wife who was driven into a dangerous state of mind by the judgments and machinations of osprey-eyed guardians of the proprieties.

Books by Ben Travers

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A CUCKOO IN THE NEST
MISCHIEF
ROOKERY NOOK
THE DIPPERS

MISCHIEF

BY

BEN TRAVERS

"Why, the news is that Cuckoldom in folio is newly printed; and Matrimony in quarto is just going into the press. Will you buy any books, Mademoiselle?"

The Provoked Wife.— VANBRUGH

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1925

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

TO

WILLIAM McFEE

A SMALL INSTALMENT OF A LARGE
DEBT OF GRATITUDE

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PART I

MORNING OF MISCHIEF

MISCHIEF

CHAPTER I

PRELUDE TO MISCHIEF

ONE night Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Bingham went to Ciro's. They had been married only about six months. Mr. Bingham had never been to Ciro's before in his life. His surprise, therefore, upon seeing his wife there was considerable.

She was dancing with Algy Richardson Gascoyne.

Mr. Bingham had left home only that evening, intending to go to Yorkshire on business. His first night away from home since his marriage. And here she was. The moment his back was turned. Algy Richardson Gascoyne.

Her behaviour gave her rather pompous bridegroom of fifty furiously to think, and even yet more furiously to imagine. He retaliated by leaving Ciro's without giving her the chance of seeing him, and by returning to their house in Prince's Gate in good time to witness the manner of her home-coming. She kept him waiting such a devil of a time that he began to think she must be out for the whole night, which gave him to imagine more furiously than ever; but at length, from an upper window, he saw her arrive in a taxi; and after kissing Algy Richardson Gascoyne good-night, she came, still

dancing, indoors and up to her bedroom, where, erect in the bed, with the brow of Jupiter for some nonsense of Juno's, and with as much dignity as can possibly be assumed by a middle-aged gentleman in Swan-stripe pyjamas, he confronted her.

She was startled, certainly, but not so impressed by his challenge as he had hoped. Indeed, she laughed aloud, and told him that if he only knew how supremely ridiculous he looked, sitting up there in his pyjamas and doing a strong silent act, he would pull the blankets over his head and keep them there. After which, she proceeded, very flippantly, to continue to dance while disrobing; so that the scene suggested not so much the first breach of the married peace, as the spectacle of an Oriental potentate being wooed from his ennui in the approved method.

"Stop that now. Come! Tell me at once, where have you been spending the night?" demanded Mr. Bingham.

"I've been to Ciro's with Algy Gascoyne," she replied. "And—(*I wanna go way home to Wagon-Wheel-Gap—tew Wagon-Wheel-Gap with yew*)—And what have you been up to, I should like to know. Yorkshire, indeed!"

"As a matter of fact, I was at this Ciro's myself, and saw you there," announced the husband, secretly a trifle peeved at the frankness of her confession.

"*Were* you? I never saw you there. And if you saw me, why ask where I was? And who were you at Ciro's with, you old Yorkshire pudding?"

Mr. Bingham, unfortunately, had a perfectly straightforward, above-board and business-like reason for having been to this place, Ciro's. Simply the man with

whom he had hoped to conduct business in Yorkshire had arrived in London, and had met Mr. Bingham at King's Cross while the latter was waiting for the train. So Mr. Bingham had returned with this man to Piccadilly, had dressed at his club, had dined and conversed with this man, and (this man being rather a nob) had subsequently agreed to accompany this nob to this place, Ciro's. At Ciro's, glancing down from the gallery at the dancers below, he had beheld his wife, who could have no such good excuse for being there, especially with Algy Richardson Gascoyne.

Mr. Bingham had with difficulty succeeded in keeping his sorry secret from the nob. If truth be told, he had been subjected to the poisonous ordeal of listening to the comments of the nob concerning his wife, whose appearance happened to make a decided hit with the nob. Mr. Bingham did not, however, repeat this detail to Mrs. Bingham, rightly judging that it would only appeal to her vanity and make her more obstinate and troublesome and matters worse generally.

"So that is how I happened to be there," he concluded. "As for you, will you kindly stop all this humming and buzzing and swaying about, and put on your nightgown and oblige me with an explanation of what you mean by it? Come!"

Mrs. Bingham, who was very young and pretty, and who had becomingly shingled hair and a retroussé nose and jade earrings, and who was by this time in a condition calculated to drive the most case-hardened Oriental potentate from his ennui, responded by seating herself casually on the foot of the bed, and giving her husband her candid, if somewhat involved, views on how to be happy though married, when respectively fifty and

twenty-six. He was slow to succumb to her pretty arguments and her patently innocent admissions. Why had she not informed him of her intentions for the night, before he set out? Because, dear old fathead, the intentions had never occurred to her until after her lonely dinner. This youth, though—Algy Richardson Gascoyne? . . .

"Well?" she asked sharply, exhibiting for the first time, and, despite her condition, a certain warmth. "What have you got against him anyway?"

"You allowed him to kiss you in the cab."

"Yes. I've known Algy for years."

"That's no excuse now you're married."

"He was at school with my sister."

"Your sister?"

"I mean I was at school with his sister. It's all the same thing. A kiss in a taxi—good heavens! If every taxi told!"

"There's no need to be festive about it. I'm very put out. In fact, I won't stand it. This, after six months! You're behaving like a fast woman."

"Well, I've had to behave like a very slow one for the six months," said Mrs. Bingham, leaving the bed.

He continued rigorously, "I should raise no unreasonable objection to your going out to a dance, but I dislike these underhand methods."

"So do I," she cried. "You saw me there, and sneaked home and watched me arrive and spied on me generally. Now, look here, Reggy. We've been very happy so far, but this is the way to begin spoiling things."

Mr. Bingham wormed himself with difficulty (he was stout) into a recumbent attitude. "We'll discuss this

in the morning. If you must have amusement, I'll take you to amusement. But you'll give me an undertaking to see no more of this young man."

Mrs. Bingham, who was in front of her mirror and threatening to resume dancing, declared that she would do nothing of the sort.

"Oh, won't you! We shall see," said the husband, raising his head without moving his shoulders. "Stop that, will you, at once, and get into bed."

He turned on his side, and continued to mutter to himself in the sheets, "Idle young gadabout! Do-nothing of a fellow! I'll teach him to kiss you in taxis."

"He learnt that years ago," commented the wife.

The Reverend Stanley Hipgrave does not participate in the events hereinafter chronicled, for he has left these shores and is now in Australia. But may his deanery be plagued by rabbits, and may he never again hold the ashes, for what he did before he started.

For he married her to Reginald Bingham—gay, elegant, fascinating Eleanor—he married her to this pomposity of fifty. Any discriminating clergyman, taking but one look at the couple as they presented themselves for wedlock, would have turned and bolted himself into the vestry until after the hours prescribed (for some reason) for the ministers of God to perform this line of their business. But Hipgrave merely gulped, read, joined, blessed, pocketed his fee, and went to Australia.

But the luck of this man Reginald Bingham, his outrageous success! He seemed to spend his life in observing the ambitions of his fellow-men, and in swooping in upon them and cutting them out. Hitherto he had confined his activities to business, which he

conducted on the lines of a modern and commercial equivalent to some snorting mediæval swashbuckler—discovering rivals with interests in timber forests and options on coalfields, and cutting them out and bashing them on one side with great sweeping drafts on banks, and enormous thudding great batches of preference shares, even as his earlier prototype swung the foes from his path with his searing steel.

Reginald Bingham's only reason for going down to Hutton Court, Henley, as the guest of Sir Somebody Duddingbury for the week-end, was that he understood that Sir Somebody was about to interest himself in some oil-wells, or something; and Mr. Bingham made up his mind that he would discover what it was all about, and, if there was anything in it, that he would cut Sir Somebody clean out of the business. And down at Hutton Court, also for the week-end, was this delightful creature, Eleanor.

He found her surrounded by fatuous and sandwich-handing and cushion-thumping young penniless men in flannel bags. Was diverted for the first time from stern commerce to more romantic adventure. Swooped in and utterly routed the open-mouthed flannel-bagged brigade, and cut them out and carried off this delicious woman and bore her away and upped his banns and Hipgrave-ho before she had time to recover her breath, so it appeared. But, as a matter of fact, she had never lost her breath at all.

She submitted with cynical readiness to this pounding fellow. She admired him for his cool supremacy, rather as one admires a good-natured policeman on point duty. He was very kind and very liberal. He had no sense

of humour, but—oh, why make excuses for her? She made none for herself. Money! Money, money, money! The frailty of such women is half their charm; and, if Eleanor had never exhibited frailty more culpable than this bargain, the fact makes her only the more tantalizing.

They met in September—early in October were married. He bought her a magnificent house in Prince's Gate, and she had everything she wanted, except fun. For no young men in flannel bags came to Prince's Gate. When Reginald entertained he entertained bald elderly men, whom he invited to dine in the Borgia spirit, in order that he might "feed them champagne" and cut them out and buy them off and do them down. At these dinners Eleanor vice-presided in the most admirable manner; but afterward she would often go upstairs to her bedroom and lie awake for hours and hours, until all the guests were half tipsy and completely cut out, and Reginald would come thudding upstairs, clapping his great hands together and saying, "Ha! a good night's work! Are you asleep?"

This Reginald Bingham was naturally, with all his success, a man of considerable authority of manner. His voice was sonorous, and he had a habit of pulling his nose about with his thumb and forefinger, and of then extending the forefinger, quivering to command attention. He seldom questioned: he stated, dictated. To his relatives, to men at his club, to the stranger within his railway carriage—they all "got the finger," as his brother Henry put it.

Reginald was clean-shaven. He would pronounce an edict, and then let his face sink to his chest with his

eyes upturned to study the effect on you; and there would roll up, round his mouth and cheeks, chin upon chin—waves of chin.

In body, he swelled in an arc of a circle from top waistcoat-button to middle trouser-button. In demeanour, grave; deprecating mirth as sheer waste of time, suspecting levity often where none was intended. He employed a special little vocabulary of terms for the rebuking and cutting short of levity. Thus, to his clerk: "Very well, then; put it in the correspondence file A, where it should go. And see here, you—don't you try any of your flounce with me, or you'll go clean out." To his stockbroker: "Come now! I called you up for a quotation. If I require any bubble and squeak, I know where to go for it." Even to his caddie: "My jigger? Very well, then, hand me my jigger. And when I happen to want any festivity from you, I'll let you know."

This was the man whose marriage bed our Eleanor had elected (still venting a faint echo of her desire to emigrate to Wagon-Wheel-Gap) to share. Many blamed her for it, but she never blamed herself as yet. The scene which had just taken place in the bedroom was the first of its kind. Never before had he spoken a cross word to her, nor she a callous, aggressive word to him.

Eleanor—an elegant name: an elegant woman. Vivacious, but of great tact and charm, and, to Reginald at any rate, more fascinating even in her repose than in her vivacity, as is often the way with elegant women. But she had a quick turn of the head for anything that promised a new excitement, a new interest. As a result, her interests did not last very long. She was wont

to snap up a pleasure, as a lizard snaps up a fly and swallows it immediately and undigested, so as to be ready to snap up the next.

Very good company; with an intimate, whispering delight for the funnily improper. Natural, laughing, worldly. Oh, and her style and her looks! Not daring in her dress, but always right, and always confident of her rightness. Not merely a very attractive and presumably frail woman for your banter and hints. She had amused, knowledgeable eyes that would take stock of you with cool reserve from behind their long lashes, and you would pretty soon discover that if you were to win her friendship it would be of her choice, and not yours. Reginald pulled his nose about with the sheer triumph of possessing her. And may Hipgrave be held up by bushrangers, and have his last damper destroyed by kangaroos.

In the morning they awoke to peace and goodwill. Eleanor kissed her husband and said she was sorry she had been out to Ciro's if he didn't like it, and still more sorry that she had been rude to him about it. All of which he acknowledged with a pat and a rather exasperating air of ascendency. He admitted, though, that he had been perhaps unnecessarily put out, and secretly reflected with some vexation that, had he been a trifle less impetuous, he might have remained at Ciro's a little longer and soaked the nob really thoroughly while he was about it.

Thus, the incident appeared to be closed. Reginald made no further reference to Algy Richardson Gascoyne. Eleanor noted the omission, but resolved to be sporting about it, and not to invite Algy to the

house, or to go out of her way to see him. Absurd, of course; but she wanted to be strictly loyal to Reggy, even in his absurdities, until she had cured him of them.

But what about the sportsmanship of Reggy?

That very morning, he rang up his sister, Louise, from his office, and told her that he would come and see her at tea-time. He required some information concerning someone. He would prefer to see her alone, so perhaps she would arrange for her husband to be elsewhere at the time of his visit.

Louise, who was the wife of Colonel Piper, arranged this without difficulty, and at five o'clock her brother presented himself at her flat in Gloucester Road. Louise did not feel very certain of Reggy these days. So long as he had kept his success to himself, well and good. But when one's brother Reggy suddenly decides to share his success with an Eleanor, ah, then is one tested.

If Reggy had been a normal brother, as Henry was, one might have made bold to comment. But Reggy was so successful and phenomenal, and, in his most relaxed moments, so condescending to one, and, in his more superior moments, so much richer than one and so contemptuous of one, that Louise had never been able to speak her mind. Once, more stung than courageous, she had said, "I hope, Reggy, she isn't fast." At which up went the forefinger. "That'll do, Louise. I know. Jealous. Because she is young and is to have a house in Prince's Gate. Oh, don't tell me. Fast, indeed! She is to be my wife, isn't she? Very well, then. Stop that."

And all the time Eleanor was fast, and Louise knew she was fast. A woman's instinct. And one day Reggy would find it out for himself.

Of course, mind you, she *liked* Eleanor. She said so herself. "Of course, mind you, I *like* her, poor girl."

"My dear Reggy," said Louise, "one so seldom sees you nowadays. And how are you? And Eleanor? I saw her only two days ago in her car outside Harrod's. I don't think she noticed me. Have you had tea?"

"Yes, yes, thank you. Never mind about all that. I've called to ask you a question, haven't I? Very well, then. Now."

He seated himself, faced his sister, brought his hands to his knees. "Algernon Richardson Gascoyne," he said, and let his face sink to his chest. Chins, chins appeared.

The dawn of suspicion glimmered in the expression of Louise. "Why do you ask about *him?*"

Reginald forefingered her away from suspicion.

"He is trying to interest himself in a certain—ah—proposition, of which I—ah—happen to know something. You know a good deal about him, I fancy. Well?"

"I don't," said Louise. "Let me see. He lives in a flat in Half Moon Street, doesn't he?"

Reginald heaved.

"Oh, do not make statements and then turn them into questions. Does he, or does he not, live in a flat in Half Moon Street?"

"Yes."

"Yes. He lives in a flat in Half Moon Street. Well?"

"I don't know much about him. I should think he's unquestionably a bad lot. He seems very well off. He does no work anyhow, and he has a noisy little car. I don't mean rattly. I mean the rich sort of popping

noisiness. He's just one of those sort of young men about town, as they used to call them when there were any. Of course the chief thing against him is his aunt."

"His aunt?"

"Yes. Mrs. Krabbe. I don't know much about *him*, but his aunt is known to be a most dreadful character. He has a sister too. I don't know much about the sister."

"Your knowledge," said Reginald, "appears to be rather limited all round."

"Well, why come to me, if you want to find out about the Gascoynes?"

"I only want to know about the young man."

"Well, there's someone much nearer home who can tell you all about *him*," said Louise.

"Who do you mean?"

"Eleanor, of course."

"Eleanor? Does she know him?"

"Oh, Reggy!"

"What?"

Louise, for once tremendously daring, rose and openly sneered at Reggy. It was not intended for a sneer. It was intended for a confidential smile of perspicacity.

"You may be clever," she said, "but really . . ."

"What are you talking about, and grimacing about? What is all this toshpail?"

"Why did you want to see me alone without Willy? You must think I'm very dense. As if Algy Richardson Gascoyne had any interests in one of your business concerns! As if you didn't know he was one of Eleanor's set before she married! Really, Reggy . . ."

Reginald made elaborate chewing movements, frowning very deeply.

"Louise," he said, after a few moments of this, "if you imagine that there's any trouble at home, you're mistaken."

She began to protest. He cut her short. "Stop that. *But*——Yes. He—this young Gascoyne man—has been trying to associate with Eleanor on the sly, and I don't like it."

"Quite right. Oh, he's a horrid lot. I'm sure of it. In fact, I *know*."

"Mind you," continued Reginald, speaking deliberately and very seriously, "Eleanor is young, and susceptible to flattery and flapdoodle. I cannot always be with her. So perhaps it's as well that you should know of this. So that *next* time I'm called away on business and have to leave her alone . . ."

"What!" cried Louise, scarce able to contain herself, "has something actually taken place, then?"

"Certainly not," he replied sternly. "Only I may require you, from time to time, to—ah—keep Eleanor company if I have to be away from home. There!" He rose. "Will you do so?"

"Yes, of course I will. Only, Reggy, if there is anything—up—I mean, it's only fair that I should know *all*. Then I can keep my eye open."

"Thank you; I don't require you to keep your eye open," he answered with dignity from the doorway. "Nothing is—up—as you put it. There is no hanky-panky in *my* home. She knows exactly what I think about things. I don't believe in married couples having secrets from each other."

"No, nor do I," said Louise, "but . . ."

"Very well, then. There you are. Good-bye. Oh, by the way, you needn't mention any of this to your husband."

He went home for tea, and exchanged very hearty greetings with Eleanor.

He offered to take her to a theatre that night. This surprised her, for she had made him go to one or two plays soon after they married, and had discovered that he had a strong dislike for the drama. Then she saw what this meant. It was a reflection on last night. It would have been more gracious of him not to have suggested the theatre, but rather to have ignored last night completely, as though it had never occurred. This was rubbing last night in. This was a metaphorical forefingering over last night.

"All right," she thought. "When in doubt, be natural. I like theatres; he doesn't. But it won't do him any harm to be unselfish, so we'll jolly well go."

They jolly well went to a *revue intime*, of her rather wilful choice, entitled "Hi!" Eleanor would have enjoyed it more if she could have laughed without feeling all the time that he was surprised at her and impatient with her for desiring to laugh at "Hi!" He himself sat positively stupefied at the festivity of "Hi!" But when she glanced at him he always smiled and nodded, as though to say, "Go on; laugh if you find it amusing. Don't mind me."

She longed suddenly, in the middle of "Hi!" for one of two men. She longed for the man who would lie back in his stall and "laugh like a closet," as Algy would say. She longed, alternatively, for the man who would say, "I can't stick this tripe. Do you mind if I go and get a drink?" Now, at this moment, there

dawned on her for the first time (and only six months after her marriage) the full force of what she had incurred—the first gleam of realization of what his money was going to cost her.

Oh, fearsome thought! She was tired, perhaps, and worried by his bringing her here at all as the result of last night, pointing the moral tale, so to speak. She really was fond of him. She really didn't feel that little shrinking feeling as she looked at the other men in the stalls and compared them to him. She told herself she didn't. She couldn't, because if she did—after only six months of it . . .

Then another thought. "You knew it all the time. You knew it, subconsciously, the whole time from the moment you accepted him. And you swore to yourself you'd never let yourself regret. And six months of it, and here you are. Go on. Go on with your job. Go on laughing at 'Hi!' and let him smile indulgently at you for being such a fool, and pull his nose about with satisfaction at having rubbed it well into you about last night."

Thought fearsome! The car was waiting for them outside, to take them home after the show—a magnificent two-thousand-guinea affair. She caught sight of it, standing outside there, with misgiving, almost shrinking from it, as though she were ashamed of it, and ashamed of being the owner of it. Why? She didn't know why, at the time; only was conscious of that vague uneasiness about the car. It was only later that she realized it was discontent; not discontent with the car itself, but discontent that the car was all she could get with his money. And she wanted more —infinitely more. Or infinitely less, was it?

When they got in he had to sit up and do some work which he had put off, rather pointedly, in order to gratify her craving for amusement. She turned to go upstairs, then followed him into his study. This wouldn't do. The air must be cleared—by a storm, if necessary, but cleared.

She told him in her own natural way that next time he was angry with her, and when she had said she was sorry, then let them forget it and go on as if nothing had arisen. No more of these stratagems and coals of fire.

He said, "You're over-tired, I think." Then he lost his patience. "Confound it, you ask to be amused, and I do my best. I take you out to amuse you. You choose your own form of entertainment—this thing, 'Ho!' I postpone my work to take you out. What more can I do?"

"It wasn't you and I," she said. "That's the whole secret of a man and woman getting on together. I believe—to be 'you and I.' We can get on very well, I believe, so long as you are you—to yourself as well as to me—and I am allowed to be I, and not the wife out of 'The Problems of Matrimony' by Doctor Virginia Creeper."

He looked quite alarmed. "What in the devil's name are you talking about?"

"Can't you understand?" she said. "I don't promise I shall never do anything to make you angry, but when I do . . ."

"You make me angry now," he cried, and obviously told the truth, for he went on to speak his real mind. "A nice evening's entertainment this has been! I suppose you prefer dancing on the sly with your Algys,

but I can tell you, you'd better try to find my company amusing enough for you, because, by Christopher, it's the only company you'll get."

"That's better," said Eleanor, perceptibly brightening. "That does me more good than fifty theatres."

But, even then, he pretended he didn't understand her.

This was in April.

At the end of June Reginald had to go to France on business which would keep him abroad for a fortnight or more, and would entail a good deal of travelling. He might have to go to Holland, and possibly Sweden. His plans were very unsettled. It would be better, he thought, if Eleanor remained behind. It wasn't as though there was any pleasure to be got out of it. What did she say?

She was quite willing to fall in with his wishes in the matter. Of course she liked to be with him, but on a business visit of this sort . . . Later on, he should take her to Pourville for a real holiday.

So she said she would stay at home by herself, and in private made an honest and quite unsuccessful attempt not to feel pleased.

But, two evenings before Reginald was due to leave, along to Prince's Gate came Louise. With a slightly exaggerated heartiness of manner and rapidity of speech which smacked of prearrangement, she sprung her invitation. Would Eleanor come and stay at the flat in Gloucester Buildings for the fortnight while Reggy was abroad? Reggy, while Eleanor yet hesitated and eyed him plaintively for help, brought his hands together just as he was accustomed to do when he came up to bed after feeding and freezing out a victim.

"Excellent! Now, that is really most satisfactory. My one misgiving was that you might feel lonely all by yourself here, my dear."

Eleanor, who read the symptoms of the rapidity of speech and falsity of smile in Louise as a doctor reads your measle-spots, immediately, and with the best of grace, accepted. She would come along to Gloucester Road on the day following Reggy's departure.

"I shall be leaving by the day-boat train, you know —quite early," said Reggy, stretching himself aimlessly.

"Yes, why not come the same day?" said Louise.

"Very well, then," said Eleanor at once, "the same day. Thank you most awfully, Louise. Topping of you."

She felt the indignation in her like a physical pain, nagging and being aggravated and telling of danger. And, because she knew that to rebel now would be his justification, she fought it. She did not analyse her feelings, but she decided that, in some way, she owed it to her own pride to ignore this insult. Ah, but this couldn't go on. This wasn't *her*. This wasn't "you and I." Then the thought came to her, "He can never be 'you and I'; he hasn't got it in him." And her conscience said, "It's your own doing—it was your own choice." And she said, "I know; but I thought I might be able to make him 'you and I.'"

Patting and smiling, off went Reginald to his boat-train, and, within half an hour, Louise was at Prince's Gate for her. She thought, "Oh, I know where the brink of catastrophe is well enough, without being lugged to it and shown it"; but she only said, "How kind of you to come along so soon. I haven't even packed anything yet."

She went upstairs and packed things, pride laughing nervously in her throat and fighting that pain of anger.

But she was right, and oh, how dangerous a thing it is to drag a young woman like this—capricious, but battling with her caprice; impatient, but wearing patience like a penitent's sackcloth—how dangerous a thing it is to drag such a woman to the brink of catastrophe and to say, "Look at what we are holding you back from." Because the prospect beyond is not by any means repellent. On the contrary, it is a very dazzling prospect, and an enticing.

Why, you, madam, who perhaps have yourself been to the brink and had a look, you know very well how difficult it is to avoid making just another little sneaking visit, for another little peep at that tantalizing prospect beyond. It is such a seductive experience.

CHAPTER II

A SKIRMISH WITH MISCHIEF

THE three little brothers Twigg were dentists; L. Twigg, D. Twigg, O. Twigg. They practised in Kensington in partnership. Each had his own torture-chamber, whizzing drill, patients, small talk. They participated in profits, a waiting room, an attendant, and the habit of completely gagging a victim and then saying, "Now, tell me when this hurts."

Into the waiting room of the three Mr. Twiggs there came one Monday morning Mrs. Piper and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Bingham. The attendant soon showed Mrs. Piper into the L. torture-chamber and informed Mrs. Bingham that Mr. D. would be disengaged shortly. The attendant then handed Mrs. Bingham an excellent, if somewhat superannuated, volume entitled "King Albert's Book", and withdrew.

At 11.30, a gentleman arrived to fulfil an appointment with Mr. O. The attendant ushered him into the company of Mrs. Bingham, gave him "Sea-Pie", and left him there.

At the moment of this visitor's entrance Mrs. Bingham was busily engaged in searching in a handbag for a handkerchief. This found, she replaced the handbag on the table, and glanced at her fellow-victim, who was standing looking at her and grinning very broadly.

"Golly!" said Eleanor. "Did you come on purpose?"

"How do you mean exactly 'on purpose'?" replied Algy Richardson Gascoyne. "I didn't come on purpose to see you, but I did come on purpose to see O. Twigg. However, I shall be only too pleased to see you instead, because I'd much rather see you than any one else, and I'd much rather see any one else than O."

"Algy," said Eleanor, both her hands in his, by this time, "what a fluke! You were the one person I felt I ought to see, and the one person I was trying not to. Can you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," he said, "because, as a matter of fact, that's almost exactly the state of affairs between myself and O. Twigg."

"Never mind O. Twigg. Do you know why I haven't been near you or written to you or rung you up for the last two months?"

"No, I do not."

"You're not hurt about it, are you?"

"Oh, dear no," said Algy. "I supposed that, when wanted, I should be sent for again. Meanwhile, a little goes a long way. You nearly laid me out last time. I love to dance, but oh, my feet! Why haven't you?"

"Because Reggy, my husband, saw you dancing with me at Ciro's, and kissing with me in a taxi," she replied.

"That's really very second-sighted and magical of him," said Algy, "considering he was spending the night down a coal-mine in Yorkshire. Did he rub his lamp, or something?"

"He didn't go. He stayed in London and came home. He was at Ciro's and saw me dancing, and he was at home and saw me kissing."

"He sounds like the flying squad of the Purity League," said Algy.

"I found him in bed."

"Ah! I must say, I wondered where you found him."

"He's a dear," said Eleanor, quickly on the defensive, "and I'm always anxious to please him. And he said he didn't like my going out with you and kissing you in taxis."

"Oh, the spoilsport!" remarked Algy, indignantly.

"So that's why you haven't heard of me since."

"Where is this man now?" asked Algy. "With any luck he might object to my being here, and I'm longing to find an excuse to foil O."

"He's in Paris," said Eleanor. "And if only you knew the trouble you've caused, you'd never kiss a girl in a taxi again."

"Don't tell me then," said Algy.

She seated herself, and recounted the sequel to their last meeting. She was very flattering to Reggy. She mentioned the visit to "Hi!" but only as proof of Reggy's genuine desire to gratify her. She laughed over the sweet, well-meaning care which had inspired his sending her now to Louise while he was on the Continent. Only because he was afraid she might feel lonely. Algy needn't think it was because Reggy couldn't trust his wife.

"You said just now it was the direct result of my having kissed you in the taxi," said Algy.

"Yes, and so it is of course," she admitted, candidly.

"Only, can't you see I'm doing my best to be loyal?"

Algy nodded. "Quite right too. So that what it boils down to is that there haven't to be any more nights at Ciro's because Reggy doesn't like it, and you're not going to do anything Reggy doesn't like. Is that it?"

She did not reply for a moment; sat intertwining her fingers, examined them, looked up at him suddenly and laughed.

"I don't know," she said. "Silly, isn't it?"

"No," said Algy. "No; if that's the reason, it's a very good one. That's all right, Elly." He caught her wistful look, and laughed back at her. "Only, if it's just because you're afraid Louise would find out and report it on your husband's return—if *that's* your reason, what time do we meet?"

"Oh lord, I'm not afraid of Louise," said Eleanor. "Besides, she doesn't know that there's been any trouble over you."

"I bet she does."

"I bet she doesn't," said Eleanor almost vehemently. "I hope Reggy's got a bit more self-respect than to go and repeat a thing like that to his sister."

"Well, then, if Louise doesn't know I'm undesirable, your reason must be that you know your husband is against our spending the evening together, so we won't do it. As I say, I think you've been very sensible."

"I've been very dull," said Eleanor, toying with this situation. In very much the same way a child toys with a china ornament, and it is the liability of the china ornament to fly into a thousand fragments at any moment that constitutes its peculiar charm as a plaything.

"Yes, I've been very dull. Why must 'sensible'

be another word for 'dull'? It never has been before with me. At Louise's—my hat, it is dull, Algy! After dinner at Louise's!"

"How long have you been there?"

"Three days. I've got another ten days of it—ten nights."

"Who is there?"

"Louise and Willy. You don't know them, do you?"

"No. I know Louise by hearsay. Who is Willy—Louise's little boy?"

"Her husband. He's rather a dear in his way, but it isn't a very exciting way. Still, I believe I might have some fun with him if Louise wasn't there. He's an old retired colonel."

"The only way to have fun with old retired colonels is to tread on their feet," said Algy. "And even that palls after a time."

"Then there's Henry," continued Eleanor. "He's been in once to make a four at bridge."

"Who is Henry?"

"Reggy's brother. He's just come home on leave from some job in the East. He's quite human, too. He's younger than Reggy. I like Henry."

"Well, dash it, why can't Henry take you out and make a fuss of you?"

"Oh, I don't want to be taken out," she said, impetuously. That little pain of annoyance was still with her, and she seemed to feel a nasty twinge of it just at this moment. "I only want to be myself. My husband can't go away for ten days without leaving me to be guarded like a fallen housemaid in a rescue home. This woman's jealous of me, and she loves the job, revels in it, gloats over it. I can't go out alone for five

minutes to a post office. Why, she's here now—with Mr. L."

"My God! I wish I was L.," said Algy.

"I tell you, Algy," went on Eleanor, and her fingers beat a little tattoo on the table, "there's only one thing that keeps me from plunging off the deep end and shocking them all to blazes."

He said quite coolly and sincerely, "Well, Elly, if he's a good old thing at heart, and you're fond of him, you're quite right to stick it."

"Fond of him! If I were as fond of him as all that I'd be in Paris with him, wouldn't I?"

"What is it, then?"

"I could dodge Louise in ten seconds," said Eleanor. "Or I could snap my fingers in her face and go off home on my own, and go off elsewhere on my own, too. And the only reason why I don't do it is because that's just what they're asking me to do and challenging me to do and egging me on to do. 'You can't be trusted, so while I'm away you go to Louise.' That's what I was told. He went to Louise without asking me and fixed it up. Retaliate—good heavens, I could retaliate quick enough. That's the very reason why I don't—because it seems so easy and—cheap. It seems more dignified to let him be a——" She checked herself, was silent for a moment; then looked up at Algy again and laughed. Quite a jolly laugh; no bitterness in it. Only in it, in the laugh, just the faintest note of a query.

Algy didn't laugh. He merely said, "Well, I'm awfully sorry it's turned out like this, Elly."

"Oh, it hasn't," she replied. "I didn't mean to say things against him. He's all right. Only, I do get so bored and irritated sometimes. It's all up to me. It's

my doing. Only it isn't quite 'us' just yet, you understand?"

"Yes," said Algy. "And you'd better not ask my advice. Because, personally, I wouldn't stay at Louise's another day."

"Ten," she said. "Ten more."

Algy raised his head suddenly and stood with his mouth open, as though listening.

"Hold on," he said, "I've got an idea."

"Oh, I've got plenty of ideas," said Eleanor. "But——"

"Wait a moment. You know Diana?"

"Oh, Diana, yes. How is she? I forgot to ask. It's years since——"

"Diana is at the moment all on her own in a cottage."

"In a cottage? Where and why?"

"You've heard me speak of old Hole?"

"Old Hole? Is that the name of the cottage?"

"No, old Hole is my uncle. Benbow Hole."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes, my uncle. *Mon oncle.* The old gentleman who has the *parapluie.* You have *not* heard of him?"

"I've heard of your aunt," said Eleanor.

"Oh, no; she's quite different. She has *la plume.* She is my father's sister, and old Hole is my mother's brother, so they don't pair off at all. Though I should think it's quite possible that Auntie may be the original cause of Uncle Benbow Hole being a woman-hater."

"A woman-hater?"

"Yes. He lives all by himself in a cottage miles from anywhere, hating women. All except Diana. Diana is the sort of girl that can get on with every man and can't get off with any of them."

"But you said just now that Diana was alone in the cottage."

"She is. You see, the uncle got suddenly taken worse, and was vetted and sent cursing to a cure at Harrogate. So Diana had to go down and look after the cottage while he was away. Poor little devil, I imagine she's pretty lonely, as it's a most out-of-the-way spot and she couldn't get any one to go with her at such short notice."

"Why didn't you go with her yourself?"

"What? Why should I? She's only my sister. On the other hand, why don't you take it on for a week?"

"Me?"

"Yes," said Algy. "It would get you out of Louise gracefully and yet without detriment to your rather involved sense of dignity. Moreover, I would come down and stay hard by and take you for runs in the car with Diana as chaperon. Not even your husband could object to our meeting under the eye of Diana. And lastly, and frankly leastly, you would be doing Diana a very good turn."

Eleanor did not reply, but sat digging her finger into the pretty point of her chin. Algy, who was a loose-limbed young man of thirty, rested against the table and watched her, smoothing his hair. He had a long mouth set to a smile, but his large and rather surprised eyes saved his expression from any suggestion of malice. While she deliberated he continued to talk, not persuasively, but in the languid tone of one who had plenty of time to play with.

"It seems to me to fit in all round. Your husband doesn't want you to see me alone in taxis and Ciro's

and places. You want to do your best to please him, but rather resent being looked upon as unable to take care of yourself, or unwilling to, as the case may be. For you to meet me under circumstances beyond suspicion, namely, with Diana in the offing, seems a very fair compromise. You'll be having your own way, and your husband will be having half his own way, which is half more than his share as a husband. You will escape from Louise and Siddy, or whatever his name is, and, though I don't suppose you care much about going to a Somerset cottage for a week in June in the ordinary course, it'll be very kind to Diana. You say that Louise doesn't know about the little dust-up at home over me and you and the taxi and Ciro, so she can't possibly suspect you of ulterior motives. In any case, the motives are not ulterior. I daresay I ought to confess quite openly that my inclinations are strongly ulterior, but even if I wanted to misbehave myself I shouldn't suggest bringing Diana into it, partly because she's my sister and partly because I know she wouldn't stand for it. So there we are, and if you agree I'll wire Diana and tell her you're joining her to-morrow."

"Where is this place?" asked Eleanor. "Is it fearfully countrified?"

"Cows in the bathroom," said Algy. "Chool is its name. April Cottage, Chool. I'm afraid it must be an absolutely one-horse place. In fact, I should think it was no-horse; because my uncle dislikes his fellow-man and simply loathes his fellow-woman."

"Where would *you* stay?"

"There must be a town not far away. And where there is a country town there is a choice of pubs."

Eleanor breathed deeply and dubiously.

"I daresay I should get on with Diana all right for a week," she said. "But, you know, I'm afraid it isn't so much for her sake that I'm inclined to go. Only it *would* be an opportunity for showing my people that I'll stay where I like. It wouldn't be like packing up and going home, which would be asking for ructions which I want to avoid. Yes, I think I'll go."

"Righto," said Algy, casually. "When?"

"To-morrow."

'I'll wire Diana to meet you. Better make it the day after to-morrow, then she can write you all about it by to-night's post."

"All right," said Eleanor. "The day after to-morrow. Wednesday."

"And as for me," said Algy, "I won't come down at all unless you like."

"Oh, don't take any notice of all that tommy-rot," said Eleanor. "Of course you can come down."

"Mr. D. Twigg is ready now, madam," said the attendant from the doorway.

The attendant was masculine; a monotonous, melancholy man, as who would not be, after a course of years misspent in the occupation of piloting victims to the rack? He held the door open for Mrs. Bingham, who obeyed his summons and went her way as promptly and gallantly as a grand duchess facing the inquisitors. In passing, she said to Algy, "I shall hear from your sister to-morrow then." He nodded and she nodded back with a smile.

The attendant consoled Mr. Richardson Gascoyne with the information that Mr. O. would soon be ready for him, and was, in fact, only waiting for the gentleman who was going to administer the gas. He then

followed Mrs. Bingham into the hall and closed the waiting-room door.

Algy had not been alone thirty seconds before his pleasant countenance once more was illumined with inspiration. Of course! Fool! Why hadn't he arranged to motor Eleanor down to this unexplored retreat? In justice it must be stated that, whatever his declared inclinations, he only thought to render Eleanor a purely practical service. Indeed, it came as a shock to him to realize that, if he did motor her down, he couldn't prudently call at Louise's for her. What narrow-minded humbug! Poor old Elly! Why in Heaven's name had she gone and married into this state of affairs?

Algy, being like most of the younger generation to-day very outspoken, was no worse than he appeared on the surface. On the surface he appeared to be a very fortunate and idle young man who differed from the majority of well-to-do young men in finding life very amusing. It cannot be said that he displayed any of the qualifications of the heroic, unless a sense of humour may be urged as the saving grace in so lamentable a case. But Algy did not concern himself very deeply with the subject of heroism. He was well off but not pretentious; he was idle but not vicious—the right women liked him, a good sign. The right men liked him, a better. He knew the difference between escapade and dishonour, and was good at cricket. Stand Eton, Oxford and the Empire Promenade where they did?

He decided immediately to invite Eleanor to be motored down to this place, Chool, because he had a completely comfortable conscience in the matter. Unfortunately, he couldn't communicate his idea to

Eleanor at the moment, for by the time she was through with D. he would be in the grip of O., while Louise, having survived L., would be back in the waiting room. He must therefore write to Eleanor. What was Louise's address?

A telephone directory stood on the writing table in the window, and he crossed the room and was instinctively turning the pages before he discovered that he had no idea of Louise's surname. He had probably heard it, but had forgotten it. He hadn't even really met Louise at all.

Well, never mind; he must write to Eleanor at her own house at Prince's Gate, with "Please forward" on the envelope. Only, dash it, he must wire Diana to do the same. A silly situation, considering that in this very building were both the lady whose address he wanted and the lady the address belonged to.

Then a very simple solution occurred to him.

On the centre table lay the vanity bag. Eleanor had pushed it on one side as she looked up and saw him first, and there it remained. He opened it and glanced at the contents. A small purse; her little complexion-and-lips outfit complete with small mirror—no more. She had retained the handkerchief.

He quickly scribbled a note on the Twiggs' notepaper:

DARLING OLD ELLY,

Look here. I'll have my car ready on Wednesday next and off we'll go to this place by road. I won't call for you, in case Louise is nosing about, but come early to my rooms in a taxi and we'll push off from there. Ring me up if you can. My best times are before 12 noon and after 4 A.M. I'll send that wire off to-day. Love.

ALGY.

He popped this note into the handbag, which he had scarcely closed before the grim sentinel reappeared in the doorway and conducted him from the sunshine of dalliance into the gloom of gas and torment, where Mr. O. and his sinister accomplice welcomed him, pinioned him, and prepared their fell balloon.

"Tell me if I hurt you," said Mr. D.

"It's all right," said Eleanor. "I only want to blow my nose."

She took the handkerchief from the ready-made feminine pocket at her bosom. Rather fortunate that she had retained the handkerchief. She had really meant to put it back in the bag.

On her way out Mrs. Piper inquired of the attendant whether he thought Mrs. Bingham was likely to be long.

"Some time yet, madam," he replied, not without a certain savage satisfaction. "She's only been gone in five minutes or so."

"Oh. Well, will you please tell her that I have gone on to High Street to do some shopping, but that I shall be back at my house in about half an hour, if she will come straight there, please?"

The attendant bowed his compliance with these instructions; and Mrs. Piper, stepping into the waiting room, picked up her handbag and left the house busily.

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE BAG

THE young man in the District train rose suddenly from his seat and passed right down the car. Once before he had assisted a female in the Underground to have an epileptic fit and had got misunderstood about it by his young lady.

Already slightly flushed by the heat, the business of taking the train, and the recent ordeal of dentistry, Louise had opened her handbag halfway between Gloucester Road and High Street in order to powder her nose. She was perhaps on the mature side to perform this popular public feature of the feminine toilet, but she very wisely decided that it was preferable to powder in the District than to feel that other women, quite as old as she, were looking with interest at the condition of her features.

But Louise did not powder.

The note was on a folded piece of dental paper, unaddressed and unenveloped. Louise, who was nearsighted, held it close to her face. The handbag slipped from her lap to the floor of the car, and she made disinterested guessing efforts to pick it up with the left hand while still completely absorbed in Algy's missive.

When the young man opposite her looked up from his paper she had just finished reading the note. She was staring vacantly into space, flushed now to a rich shade of beetroot and with the veins of her neck dis-

tended. It was then that the young man passed right down the car.

At High Street Louise did not proceed to shop as she had intended, but stood upon a curb, performing violent air-stabbing work with a purple parasol. A willing taxi bore her to her home address, and she sat upright upon the jolting seat, now freely powdering, rereading, and very audibly overcome with warmth and agitation.

Louise was a short woman with a good, big, old-fashioned, high, Victorian bust and no nonsense about it. She closely resembled one of the more aggressively protuberant types of domestic pigeon. She suffered consequently in a minor degree from the malady known to the patent medicine vendor as "quick breath." She blew a good deal.

She was not an ill-intentioned woman, but somehow it is very difficult for a lady of this shape to be at once forty-eight and pacific. She was very religious, but her devotions, emotional and high-church, did not appear to be bringing her very lasting consolation; while her bodily ailments, chiefly imaginary, caused her to rely a good deal upon material physic as well. Her bedroom cupboards were full of little ominous doses. Above the mantelpiece hung a crucifix, and immediately below it on the ledge stood a small and horrid yellow bottle bearing the chemist's label—"Mrs. Piper. Liver."

But this was the best medicine for Louise—action; action prompted by some scandal or mischief. Then she could move with the fleetest. Then the bottle of liver mixture was readily forgotten. So, for the matter of that, was the crucifix.

Algy left the Twiggs' in company with the gas

specialist. He hesitated, as the attendant opened the front door for them. His operation had not lasted long. Eleanor might still be here. But if so, Louise would assuredly be waiting for her. He rather shrank from questioning the attendant as to the movements of the two ladies, so contented himself with a quick glance into the waiting room as he passed. Ah, Eleanor had evidently departed. The handbag had disappeared. Algy offered the gasman a lift, and a few seconds later, Eleanor, gaining the front doorstep, caught a fugitive glimpse of the back of Algy's head being borne rapidly away in a taxi.

When Louise reached her home, which was a flat near Bailey's Hotel, she found her husband, Willy Piper, standing looking out of the dining-room window with his hands in his pockets and the general air of a man who is trying hard to think of something to say he wants to do before his wife can say she wants him to do something he doesn't. He was a quiet gray man of sixty. His life was one long yielding protest.

She cried, "Willy! Willy!" and he turned.

"Hallo! What? Hallo, I say, what the deuce is the matter?"

She flourished the dental love-note. Panting, she made her revelation.

"I found this—in my bag when I—left—Twiggses. It is meant for—Eleanor. It is from—that young man."

"What young man?"

"Algy Rich-ardson Gas-Gascoyne. He's the cause of her being here—while Reggy's away—if you only knew—which you don't."

"No, I certainly don't," said Willy. "I say, steady yourself, Louise. What *is* all this?"

"I left this bag in the waiting room at Twiggses. When I came out this was in it. It's a love-letter."

"For *you?*" exclaimed Willy, incredulously.

"No, I tell you. For Eleanor."

"Oh, I see. Yes, that, of course, sounds more—I mean, go on. A love-letter from——?"

"Algy Richardson Gascoyne. Eleanor must have seen him there. She's encouraging him to go off with her."

"Go off?"

"Yes."

"Oh, go on, go off," said Willy. "What d'you mean? Do a bunk? No. Go on."

"She's arranging to run away with him, I tell you. In a car. And stay somewhere together."

"Oh, rot!"

"What's rot? You haven't read the letter."

"Nor has Eleanor, I don't suppose," said Willy. "And if you're so certain it's meant for her I don't think you ought to have read it."

"I had to read it in order to make so certain it was meant for Eleanor, didn't I?" Louise asked, defiantly.

"Oh, lord, it's no use arguing," said Willy. "What's he say?"

"You can read it for yourself."

"I don't want to. All right, I'll have a squint at it."

Louise handed him the note with a gesture intended to convey its dramatic importance. "This is no squinting matter," she declared.

He took the note with the indulgent reserve of an elderly gentleman for anything improper.

"Read it aloud," said Louise.

He read it aloud. She had recovered her breath, but drew in a further supply in a satisfied hiss.

"There you are, you see. You can tell the sort of thing that Eleanor says about me to total strangers. Not that I care about *that*. Only Reggy has caught her spooning with this young man before. The point is what's to be done about it."

Willy handed back the note and tapped pince-nez against his thumbnail.

"I don't see what you can do," he mumbled.

"What?"

"M?"

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'What are you going to do?'"

"What do you suppose?"

"M? Show her the note, I should, and say how you came to get it. You can explain. After all, it wasn't your fault."

Louise, at this, peered at her husband's face as though she had suddenly discovered a blemish thereon.

"Oh," she said, witheringly, "and surely I ought to apologize to her for having discovered that she is off on the loose and deceiving Reggy and apparently preparing to shatter the seventh commandment with this young man that Reggy had forbidden her to see and that he has sent her here to us to avoid her seeing?"

"Oh, lord!" said Willy. "I say, Louise, don't start making some appalling row and raising old Harry. Tell her she mustn't do it, if you like. That's the straightforward thing to do."

"That's what you'd do, is it?"

"Of course. At least, if I did anything that's what I'd do. If you think it's your duty——"

"And what about my duty to Reggy?"

"Well, dash my wig," cried Willy, raising his voice in despair rather than in argument, "what better turn can you do Reggy than to stop his wife buzzing off in a car with this blighter?"

"Yes, and make her doubly careful next time."

"I don't think, myself, that there's as much in it as you make out. I don't believe Eleanor's——"

"That she's what?"

"I don't believe she's hot stuff like that."

"I'm sorry I consulted you at all about this," said Louise.

"You haven't. So you needn't worry about that," said Willy. "Well, what's your idea, then?"

"I shall say nothing. I shall wait and hear what Eleanor's excuse is for leaving here on Wednesday. She's bound to tell me where she's going."

"Why should she?"

"Because she's doing it all in a thoroughly underhand and hole-in-the-corner sort of way, and she wouldn't leave a false address, because she'll want her letters to know what Reggy's movements are. You see, you don't *think*, do you? So I shall just wait and see and lay my plans accordingly. I may have to wire Reggy."

"Hell!" said Willy. "Well, it's nothing to do with me, mind. I refuse to take any part in it."

"That's just as well, I expect," said Louise.

When a pair yoked in the double harness of matrimony succeeds in jogging along the highroad of life without mishap, it is generally taken for granted that they are evenly matched in speed and temperament. But there are, truth to tell, a great number of tandem teams upon the road; the mare setting the pace, her

partner either pulled or propelled in distressed accordance, while that exacting female driver, Mrs. Public Opinion, is ever ready to display her impartial proficiency by severely curbing the one and heartily flogging the other. Ah, many and many a tandem on the road. And here was one of them.

Eleanor returned to the flat in Gloucester Buildings light-hearted as a schoolgirl within sight of the holidays. It was all so pleasant. She was delighted now at her decision to get out of the flat. She could gently score off Louise and provide Reggy with a tactful little object lesson. She disliked the idea of staying in a cottage, and was not confident of being able to appreciate the depths of the country for a week with Diana Richardson Gascoyne; but these were objections easily outweighed. She would be free to be herself anyhow, and to show them that she fully intended to be herself what was more. And yet it was all so pleasant. And she felt that the more pleasant she made it the more complete would be her little triumph over Louise.

In less carefree mood she would have observed that there was something up at the flat. Willy was self-conscious, spoke even less than usual and buried himself beneath the folds of a *Times* which he had already practically learnt by heart. Louise was aggressively sociable, assuring and buoyant as a cork on the ocean. After lunch Willy was sent to Lord's. The two women repaired to the drawing room, rather aimlessly, as women do after lunch.

"What are your plans for the afternoon?" asked Louise.

"Yours," replied Eleanor, sweetly. "But I think I'd better write some letters."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"I see. Let me think," said Louise. "To-morrow is Tuesday, isn't it? I thought on Wednesday we might go off somewhere for the day. Would you care to?"

"Yes," said Eleanor. "I should."

"You don't mind using your car? It would be rather nice to get out into the country."

"Yes, wouldn't it?" said Eleanor.

"M'h'm. Very well then. I'll leave you to write your letters now. Reggy is still in Paris, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's staying there longer than he expected. He's at the Roi Edouard Sept until Thursday or Friday."

"Oh, yes? My love to him," said Louise.

She left the room, exasperated by the coolness of this wanton. Why no mention of her departure on Wednesday? Was she going to try and keep it dark and make a bolt for it? Or perhaps she hadn't thought of a good enough excuse yet.

No mention all the day of the impending parting. Louise got quite restive about it. All sorts of doubts arose. Why was the note in the handbag at all? Surely Eleanor must have seen the young man and made some tentative arrangement of which the note was the outcome? In the evening a light was thrown by Eleanor returning the handkerchief with apologies and thanks. Louise laughed skittishly. "Not at all, dear. That's quite all right. But what a good thing nobody saw you taking it. They might have thought you were pilfering."

This drew no reply and Louise had to content herself with speculations.

Next morning out it all came. A letter was brought by hand from Prince's Gage, having arrived there by the first post. Eleanor read it at breakfast before the eyes of Louise. Then looked up blandly.

"I say, Louise. I've got to go."

"To go?"

"Yes."

"To Reggy? To Paris?"

"No. I've just heard from a girl friend who wants me."

"What, dear? A girl friend? Wants you? Where?"

"A girl called Diana Richardson Gascoyne. An old friend. We were at school together."

"Oh-h, yes," said Louise. "I think I've heard the name. What is the matter with you, Willy?"

"What? Nothing. Coffee-grounds in my throat. Why can't this cook——?"

"And is she ill or something?" continued Louise.

"No, but she's all alone in a cottage at a place in Somerset and she's fearfully lonely and she's just heard that Reggy's away and so she wants me to go and keep her company for a week. So, naturally, I will. It's only kind, isn't it?"

"I see. And when do you think you'll go?"

"To-morrow," said Eleanor, definitely. "I hope you don't mind. It's been awfully good of you to look after me as you have."

"H'm. How are you going down there? Are you taking the car?"

"Oh, no. You can use the car while I'm away if you like. No, I shall go by train. She tells me the train to come by. Leave Paddington 11.15, change at Bristol, and go on to a place called South Ditherton."

"Well," said Louise. "I suppose I can't prevent your going."

Eleanor laughed fondly. "It's very sweet of you to want to," she said.

"What sort of a place is she at then?" asked Louise.

"A tiny cottage, apparently. She's looking after it for a sick uncle."

"Nothing infectious, I hope?"

"I hope not," said Eleanor. "Because I'm going to sleep in his bed, it appears."

"I beg your pardon, dear?"

"The uncle's bed. Oh, he isn't there. That's why Diana's there. She says here, 'There's only one bedroom; in fact, there's only one bed at present, but I'll get another.'"

"Good gracious," said Louise. "Well, I suppose you know your own mind?"

"Oh, intimately," said Eleanor.

"To-morrow you say you're going?"

"Yes. I shall have to go home and get some country things."

"When? This morning?"

"Yes."

"I'll come with you."

"Do."

"Will you wire Reggy?"

"Reggy? Oh, no," said Eleanor. "I'll write him. You can forward any letters that come here for me. I'll give you the address."

"I'd better write it down now, while we remember," said Louise.

She rose and made for the writing table. As she

passed Willy he grimaced and whispered something below his breath about washing his hands of it. Louise nudged him violently to caution, but even when she was at the writing table, the idiot continued to perform foolish pantomimic gestures indicative of the washing of hands. Eleanor, however, was looking through her letter again.

"April Cottage, Chool, near South Ditherton, Somerset," she said, glancing up at Louise, who inscribed, repeating.

Presently, the two proceeded together on foot to Prince's Gate.

"I never knew," said Louise, as they went, "that you were such a great friend of this Miss Richardson Gascoyne's."

"No? Oh, yes," said Eleanor.

"Let me see—hasn't she a brother?"

"Yes. Algy."

"Is that his name? You know him too?"

"Better than I know Diana, if anything," said Eleanor.

"Indeed? Then you've seen him lately?"

"Oh, sort of on and off, you know—like one *does* see the friends that are such friends that you don't have to worry whether you see them or not."

"Indeed, yes. No, I'd no idea. And then isn't there an aunt with rather a shaky reputation?"

Eleanor laughed.

"Shaky is rather an apt description of her," she said.

"Why? Has she got palsy or something?"

"No. She gambles."

"Gambles?" echoed Louise.

"Yes, gambles. I don't mean that she leaps about in a field. I mean she sits at a table and plays roulette."

"Good gracious!" said Louise. "At Monte Carlo and that sort of place?"

"That sort of place," said Eleanor. "Only you don't have to go to Monte, you know."

"But, Eleanor, dear. Are these people respectable?"

"Well, they're very much the same sort of people as I am," said Eleanor, heartily. "So you can judge for yourself!"

"I hope you don't gamble?"

Eleanor made an elaborate gesture with the parasol which she carried, almost pinking Louise on the nose.

"After all, everything's a bit of gamble, isn't it?" she replied. "What about marriage? Willy, I suppose, was more or less a safe spec., but I call Reggy a positive plunge. Still, the more you plunge the more you stand to win, don't you? And I only gamble at games of skill, you know."

"I'm afraid I can't quite follow you when you talk in that deep and whatsaname sort of way," said Louise. "But I think you were fortunate to marry Reggy."

"The fortune was all on one side, I suppose?"

"Oh, Eleanor! No, I don't say that."

"You mean you won't again? That's all right then."

"Here's Prince's Gate," said Louise.

"Yes, I know," said Eleanor.

Just after Eleanor had left Gloucester Buildings with Louise Algy rang up, having ascertained her address from her housemaid at Prince's Gate. He only succeeded in getting somewhat confused in conversation with Willy, who was an indifferent performer on the

telephone. Algy extricated himself by pretending to be cut off and decided to wire. Thus on her return to the flat with Louise and a striking assortment of ladies' summer wear (country), Eleanor found a telegram awaiting her:

Mrs. Bingham 6 Gloucester Buildings S. W. 7.
What about motoring down to-morrow told Diana I should probably motor you but have heard from her you are going by train oh why do this wire whether you decided go with me in car also where meet and what time all eager for fray

ALGY.

Eleanor, who was alone in the hall of the flat, Louise having failed to observe the telegram and slipped into her room to take a Dr. Murger's Digestive Tablet before lunch, gave vent to a little exclamation of tolerant reproach. Why hadn't he mentioned this before? So like Algy to spring a suggestion of this sort on her at the last moment! It would have been delightful to drive down. She disliked the prospect of a long and tedious railway journey broken by a change at Bristol. But she had left it too late now. Louise had stated her intention of coming to Paddington to see her off. And if Louise discovered that Algy was to be at Chool she would only go and write to Reggy about it. Eleanor preferred to tell Reggy about it herself and at her own time and in her own way.

She went out while she had the chance and crossed the road to the post office, where she despatched her reply:

Richardson Gascoyne 14a Half Moon Street W. 1.
Must go by train you had better motor down alone and come cottage Thursday love

ELEANOR.

"I hear you had a telegram?" said Louise, who was washed, shrived, medicated, and awaiting lunch when Eleanor got back.

"Yes. I've just been replying to it."

"From the friend you're going to see at this cottage, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Eleanor.

CHAPTER IV

RURAL

EARLY on the Wednesday afternoon Diana Richardson Gascoyne locked the front door of April Cottage and set off at a busy walk up a winding road which led through a wood to the superior road above. The June day was hot and very still. There was thunder in the air, Diana thought. And she was quite right. There was.

After walking for nearly an hour she arrived at South Ditherton, a typical Bathstone town, cut across and across by two great main roads, like swords sparing not an old and quiet breast in the greed of conquest. The one road ran due north and south, the other due east and west; and at the point of intersection was the market square of South Ditherton and the War Memorial, round which were gathered all the chief institutions of the town—the best shops, the Town Hall, the Masonic Rooms, the Parish Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Congregational Chapel, the Baptist Chapel, and the Ring o' Bells Public House.

The railway station lay not far from the market square, and, after a glance at the Town Hall clock, Diana increased her pace and her already considerable heat. This did not detract, however, from her appearance, for in the most adverse circumstances she could not fail to look nice. She was graceful, though

she had none of her brother's length of limb. But neat and pretty and very bright-looking in her brown country coat and skirt and her yellow jumper.

The kind of girl who attends bazaars and keeps up with superannuated governesses. Eminently nice. Many, finding her reserved and undemonstrative, said she was dull; but the observant discovered in the depths of her brown eyes possibilities—possibilities. But the depths were deep.

On arriving at the railway station Diana found, to her relief, that the Town Hall clock was fast. Fast too, for South Ditherton, was young Pawley, of Pawley's motor, who was already waiting at the station by Diana's appointment.

Pawley's motor was an institution. It remained, after many years, the only automobile plying for hire at South Ditherton, which was perhaps fortunate for Pawley. Pawley, on this occasion, was asleep in the taproom of the Ring o' Bells, and the motor was in charge of young Pawley.

The latter was a red-headed youth with a drooping eyelid. And when you see a young man with a red head and a drooping eyelid in charge of a car, that car will shift. Young Pawley used his drooping eyelid to accentuate the expression of extreme cynicism with which he regarded the fine old-world traditions of South Ditherton. In his hands, Pawley's motor became a pounding Juggernaut, an emblem of the disrespectful and headlong callousness of the younger generation. This incurred the fierce resentment of some of the older folk. They would protest sometimes to old Pawley.

"That ole mowerr of yours, Mr. Pawley, that lad o' yours, 'e don't 'alf burrst the guts of she."

But the indulgent parent took a pride in young Pawley and in the headlong modern propensities of young Pawley, and would himself sometimes sit alongside the driver's seat and would bare his toothless gums and jerk his head at young Pawley for the benefit of the natives, as the old motor flashed past them at a bouncing seventeen miles an hour—like some old pioneer of a modern craze who could still turrn out and show 'em he could take a turrn with the best.

Diana said to young Pawley, "Oh. Before you take me and the friend who is coming by this train out to April Cottage, I want you to call at the furniture shop. I ordered a bed to be sent out to the cottage to-day and they've never sent it."

Young Pawley removed a cigarette, and shot some stray remnants of tobacco from his lips by an abbreviated and dry spitting process. He then said,

"Early closin'."

"Won't the shop be open?" asked Diana.

"Na," replied young Pawley. "Na, it won't and o' that neither."

"Oh, dear. Well, I don't want to hang about trying to attract their attention and that sort of thing, because I expect my friend will want to get straight out to the cottage after her journey. Is there time to run round to the shop now, before the train comes in?"

"There's time," said young Pawley, in a non-committal manner. "But it be gorrn closin'."

"Take me round there anyhow," said Diana, firmly, getting into Pawley's motor.

The furniture shop presented the appearance of an elaborate monument erected to the memory of some dead undertaker. It was locked and barred. The

contents were thickly veiled from public view. There was no bell.

"It looks hopeless, doesn't it?" said Diana.

"Ah, it do, and o' that also," said young Pawley.

"What a nuisance," said Diana. "I wanted that bed. Take me back to the station, please."

She returned to the station discomfited. Eleanor was not perhaps the best person for little trifling disarrangements to happen to. Now Eleanor would have to sleep in the one bed and Diana would have to sleep in a chair or something. It didn't really matter; only she wanted everything to be as nice as possible for Eleanor. Eleanor would have a sort of surprised smile for the place if things were wrong.

The train arrived and Eleanor descended; but not before Diana had seen her looking inquiringly out of her carriage window. She was easily spotted, being alone in the firsts. Her face was not the face of one who says, "Hurrah! Here I am," but the face of one saying "Great Scot! Is *this* the place I've chosen to come to?" But she exchanged with Diana greetings hearty if a trifle sobered by the heat. Even in her exclusive first she had found the journey rather an ordeal. It had left her with a pain which gripped her across the brow. The jolting monotony of the slow train on from Bristol had given her an unpleasant pulpy feeling all over her body, as though her flesh were not properly attached to her bones, and the heavy mineral smell of the railway lingered in her nostrils.

Worst of all the effects of the journey was the little devil who had arrived and taken possession of her nerves, urging her to be short-tempered and pricking her to be curt. The little devil showed her Pawley's

motor and said, "Look at your conveyance. Say something sarcastic about it." The little devil said of Diana, "Look at Diana. She's being affable. Tell her that you can't stick her being vicar's-daughterish like that." Eleanor held her lips together and nodded and tried to look glad. But the little devil stayed with her.

"This is South Ditherton," it said. "Dull? My dear, this is Piccadilly compared with what you are going to. For a week. It's your own fault. It's only your lack of spirit. You talk so much about being yourself. If you'd stuck to being yourself you'd have told Louise to go to hell, and you'd have been at Ciro's to-night." Nag, nag, the little devil, nagging at her nerves. In her forehead, thud, thud. She had to shift her feet about in the car for some reason. It helped her to control herself.

She was duly deposited at April Cottage with Diana, and there for the moment she should be left; for the homeward trek of Pawley's motor is not without pertinent adventure.

Pawley's motor swung round into the main road and crashed upon her homeward course, undetermined features of her mechanism twanging and vibrating within. She bounced through the outskirts of South Ditherton into the market square, which, on early closing day, was unlikely to contain any material reason for caution. But in the vicinity of the market square was the doctor's wife. And where the doctor's wife was were dogs.

If the doctor's wife was engrossed in conversation, the subject was a foregone conclusion. She could have engaged in a viva voce competition with the editor of

The Dog World and knocked him sideways. She knew the points, pedigrees, and prices of Hamways Humbug, Bellamy Bluepeter, and Condescension of Crosstown. Her life was one tangled turmoil of leashes, litters, and Lactol. By this time she had got to be rather like a dog herself.

The doctor's wife was talking to the vicar. The vicar was deaf, and the whole market reëchoed with the pleasantries combined with information uttered for his benefit. Even old Mr. Moody, sitting on the bench outside the Ring o' Bells, heard them and was somewhat intrigued by shrill female cries of "Dam" and "Bitch," until his companion, Mr. Jewell, informed him that it was only the doctor's wife talking to the vicar.

But young Pawley did not hear the doctor's wife; and though the doctor's wife could not fail to hear young Pawley, she did not realize that Fifi was in the middle of the market square. The result was that young Pawley missed Fifi and hit the War Memorial.

Fifi escaped with a fright, young Pawley with a shock, and the War Memorial with a chip. But Pawley's motor remained propped against the War Memorial, her already overwrought vitals rent asunder and water pouring, as from the rock of Moses, from her riven radiator into the market square.

Young Pawley naturally blamed Fifi; old Mr. Moody blamed the doctor's wife; the doctor's wife was inclined to blame the vicar; and Mr. Jewell, who was an advanced Socialist, made a rather sneaking attempt to blame the War Memorial.

But no matter who was to blame. The fact remained that Pawley's motor was presently lugged from the

scene, like the trunk of some veteran beast, once the pride of the herd, vanquished at last and slain in the unremitting war of Progress.

And South Ditherton was without a hireable car.

From the main road, as it runs eastward from South Ditherton, fork modest tributaries, wandering like wanton children from their mother road and getting dreadfully involved in marsh and meadow-land; skirting this village, wheeling hopefully round that boundary, swerving to ask their way of a venerable knoll, and, as often as not, expiring contentedly at the heavy gate of a hospitable farm.

But not all expire. Some struggle through to connect scattered hamlets; hamlets that are the youngest offsprings of a town, even as their road is the youngest offspring of the great main thoroughfare—places of ten cottages apiece. Alongside most of the cottages is a trim plantation of cider-apple trees; and at the door of most of the cottages is a gaunt housewife, reprimanding, in an accent too soft for wrath, the children who are in the roadway, engaged in the delightful pastime of "scaaring they pooltry."

Around these hamlets as far as eye can reach are meadows; the richest grazing in England is here. Hard by the hamlets the little roads give birth in their turn to rutty paths. You may turn down one of these, and dally by the rough meadow gates of an evening, and along the path there will come to you, like an enchanted memory of your childhood's realm of Caldecott, a stumping, funny-hatted old man with a collie and a three-legged stool and the tinkling of cans; and the cows will cluster with sedate pleasure to meet him at the

gate; and presently there will steal upon your senses the warm, seductive scent of new milk.

The first-born of the main thoroughfare from South Ditherton branches off very confidently to the north soon after you leave the town. Not all the country in this direction is meadow-land. Harking back to the west you will find hills and, clinging to their sides, deep, still woods.

In the cup of one such hillside, guarded by a towering grove in the background, facing a green strip of valley, fed by an adventurous grandchild road that came zigzagging down through the glade to join the dell; early and brightly in the sunshine, quickly and deeply in the shadow—was April Cottage.

From the upper road you would never have guessed its existence. Not even the thin blue ribbon of smoke from its kitchen chimney rose above the tops of the trees that skirted the plateau above. You might even follow the zigzagging road down for a steeply declining hundred yards before you would come suddenly upon April Cottage, as the adventuring hero comes upon the unexpected and hazardous cottage of the fairy tale.

Here normally lived alone—and happier so—old Hole, the uncle who was now at Harrogate. He lived the life of a recluse, withered, disgruntled, content only in displeasure. He saw scarcely a soul, conversed chiefly with his hens, and with them in no very amicable terms. Here, in spasms of calculating resentment, he penned a prodigious manuscript—a life-work on the subject of the evil wrought by womankind on the history of the world. He tolerated, however, Mrs. Easy, who came from the neighbouring hamlet of Chool and described herself confidently as a help. She came of

a morning and cooked Mr. Hole's one meal and performed strange hissing and thumping operations in Mr. Hole's one bedroom.

One morning Mrs. Easy sent little Easy into South Ditherton to find the doctor and to tell him to come out and inspect old Mr. Hole. This mission little Easy, though hampered by chronic adenoids and his elder brother's boots, duly performed. He arrived at the doctor's gate, was bitten by an Alsatian wolf-hound, was told through the window by the doctor's wife not to be afraid, delivered his message, and was brought back to April Cottage by the doctor himself in his car.

The result of the doctor's visit was that old Mr. Hole was ordered to Harrogate. Very reluctantly, and after making dreadful blowing noises through his nose at little Easy for having brought the doctor at all, he consented to go. The question immediately arose as to who should look after the cottage for three weeks during his absence. He refused to have strangers in the place. He would not even have Mrs. Easy, unless that lady agreed to sever herself from her offensive progeny. So he was driven to fall back once more upon the best of the diabolical sex, and Diana came.

Chool, as a place, was a mere myth. With the exception of the two or three cottages which housed Mrs. Easy and her neighbours, and which were themselves a considerable distance from April Cottage, there was no sign of a village of Chool. There was a ruin which might conceivably in the days of Alfred the Great have been Chool Church. But there was no post office; there was no village shop. There was not even a village inn. The most remarkable feature of Chool was its non-existence.

Diana silently decided that she must have company here; company intimate enough to share Mr. Hole's one bedroom and to harmonize in Mr. Hole's one sitting room. She thought it wiser not to raise the question of the company to Mr. Hole; but in the interval of time between her summons and her accession she busily canvassed her girl friends, who all with one accord began to make excuse.

Thus Diana arrived alone, and, being a practical young woman, made the best of things. But, being a practical young woman, she was not slow to incur the hostility of Mrs. Easy, who regarded the cottage as her perquisite, and resented the first hint of authority from this makeshift.

Mrs. Easy was an import from the artisan environs of Bristol; a beetle-browed, hostile woman with a caustically flexible nose and enormous hands and feet, sudden and loud in her methods, seeking refreshment in grievances. She was always quite ready to pour scorn upon Mr. Hole. She would often return to her cottage snarling like a cat, vowing that she was through with it. "To-day, for the last time, have I crossed his door. Never no more of it, not me." But she was always there next morning and Mr. Hole, pondering over his incensed manuscript in his sitting room, would frown quickly upward at the sound of the familiar clang of china in the bedroom above; until by degrees Mr. Hole and Mrs. Easy became, as it were, acclimatized to each other in wrath.

But this young woman at the cottage——

Mrs. Easy's attendance on Diana had already become irregular when one morning she did not put in an appearance at all. Next day she came, but merely stood

with arms akimbo in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Diana cook.

"Oh, that's you, is it?" said Diana without looking up from her saucepan. "If you can't come regularly, you'd better not come at all."

"I shall come when I please and when I can manage it," replied Mrs. Easy. "I am the mother of seven. I also have a husband."

"So I should hope," said Diana, stirring.

"And let me tell you," continued Mrs. Easy, "that I 'ave noticed several goings-on which would not please Mr. 'Ole. You 'ave changed round the furniture in his sitting room in a manner which he would abore. And as for straightening his bookshelves, if he knew it he'd be borne off in a fit."

"Do your work and don't talk about it or keep away," said Diana.

At which Mrs. Easy returned to her cottage, where the unpopularity of Diana with little Easy showed a very marked increase.

It was extremely lonely at the cottage. Diana had been there almost a week before she received her first visitor. Her first visitor arrived early on a Monday afternoon on a red bicycle. A telegraph boy.

Diana received the telegram with excitement which rapidly changed to quick suspicion. Algy was the author, and the elaborate programme set forth in the telegram could not have been devoted solely, or even mainly, for her benefit. This from a sister's experience.

Richardson Gascoyne April Cottage Chool South Ditherton Smst. Eleanor Delaney now Bingham at large her husband abroad

would like come stay with you for week on Wednesday if can do write her Princes Gate please forward shall probably bring her down in car

ALGY.

Eleanor? No. Diana's first instinct was antagonistic. She wanted company but Eleanor wasn't right. Not for the cottage.

Their girlhood friendship had waned. Even when they did meet nowadays they had very little in common. Except a soft spot for Algy.

Diana had half expected Eleanor to marry Algy. She wouldn't have minded that. Eleanor was Algy's sort and they would probably have been very happy. So Diana had heard of Eleanor's engagement with disappointment for Algy and with great, great disappointment in Eleanor. A fat, pedantic man of fifty. There could be only one reason for this. A house in Prince's Gate? Yes, she thought so. A Rolls-Royce? What a pity. Oh, what a pity.

Eleanor in this cottage? She wouldn't like it. She liked lots of gaiety and people. Diana could remember feeling hot-cheeked at Eleanor's supreme confidence in public. She would never endure this cottage. And why in the world was Algy the instigator of this queer business?

Still, Diana couldn't very well refuse. Sitting in Uncle Benbow Hole's parlour and biting his penholder a good deal, Diana wrote the necessary letters.

To Eleanor: her pleasure at hearing from Algy that she cared to come down for a week. But it was frightfully quiet and dull and the tiniest cottage in the weirdest spot, and she must be prepared to rough it. Own cooking and housework. And so on. But if Eleanor really meant it, she would meet her on Wednes-

day at South Ditherton station. The best train, etc. To Algy, simply:

DEAR OLD ALGY,
I have written to Eleanor and told her to come if she likes. I hope she won't be terribly bored. There's no room for you. I've told E. to come by train. Much love.

DIANA.

The only reply from either party was another wire—from Eleanor this time.

Arriving Wednesday Ditherton 3.8. Love.
ELEANOR

And here was Wednesday, and here was Eleanor at the cottage, looking already rather incongruous in her smart travelling costume. Young Pawley had dumped her portmanteau on the front step and departed, so Eleanor had to help Diana carry the portmanteau upstairs. The dressing case was light; so Diana could get that upstairs alone.

Diana, laughing, but with a touch of anxiety in the laughter, showed Eleanor the cottage. Eleanor did not seem to take very much interest in the cottage. She did not say, "Oh, what a sweet cottage!" She did not even say, "Oh, what a beastly little cottage!" She just seemed to take the cottage for granted, and said she had a headache after her journey and might she have tea? "Oh, sorry, old dear," said Diana. "Of course you shall have tea. Come down to the parlour again."

The parlour! The little devil went down to the parlour with Eleanor. She felt a sudden whelming desire

for space and rest—elaborate and untroubled rest; unrestricted, expensive space. Tea and cushions and a long cool terrace to herself. "One bedroom for the two—one bed, in fact!" laughed the little devil. "Not even a hanging cupboard. Three of the five drawers in the chest of drawers! If you want to hang your things up, you've got to hang them on a hook behind the door. Carrying portmanteaux upstairs! This for a week! You're going from bad to worse, you know. Why didn't you listen to me in London? Why hadn't you got the spirit to strike? You'd have brought Reggy to heel. Look where he's brought you!"

"I'll go to the kitchen and put the kettle on," said Diana.

Put the kettle on! Oh, for a cooling, starched maid with the tea all ready!

Not very sympathetic you find her? Unless you, who read, happen to have a good old train headache at the moment. In which case you will say to her, "Go on. *I* know. Hit Diana over the head with her confounded kettle. Burn down the cottage. I'm with you."

Diana, in the kitchen, bit her lip over the kettle. Just as she had foretold. She had wanted a friend, a convivial spirit; someone who would have a good laugh at the cottage and the bed and the chest of drawers and the hangers behind the door. Someone who would rough it, and help with the cooking, and wash up, and feed the chickens, and Vim the sink. That was the company she wanted. Instead of which——

Eleanor made an effort after tea and apologized to Diana, who laughed it off good-naturedly enough. So

far there had been no mention of Algy, but Diana seemed to find in Eleanor's change of mood a cue for Algy. But she should have waded diplomatically into the subject. Whereas with pent-up determination, and therefore obviously, she plunged into Algy.

"Now, tell me; what is Algy up to?"

"Algy?"

"Yes. What is all this, Eleanor?"

"All what?"

"Why did he send you down here? Was it only because he wanted to bring you in his car?"

"No, of course not," said Eleanor. "He never thought of bringing me in his car until afterward. Why do you ask in that tone of voice, as if his car was his bed? You're as bad as Reggy."

"Oh!" Diana took this up quickly. "Has *he* been inquisitive about Algy and you then?"

Eleanor laughed shrilly. "Diana, do you suppose for one moment that anything ever has happened or ever will happen between me and Algy?"

"I don't say it has. I only——"

"If you think Algy's like that, it shows you're a pretty bad judge," said Eleanor. Then she felt the pain again at her head and the little devil at her nerves. "Good God!" she cried. "Can't I keep my friends just because I'm married? I'm sick of all this puritanical humbug. And there's quite enough of it from my own relations without any from his."

Diana flushed. But in indignation, not in humiliation.

"If I married a man," she said, speaking hurriedly and against her own judgment, "and he had to go

abroad, do you think he'd go alone? I don't want to interfere in your private affairs; only why does Algy crop up just now? That's what I want to know."

Eleanor drew breath for something pretty tart; but resisted and relapsed.

"Oh, don't be a fool, Diana," she said in an altered key.

"All right," said Diana, relapsing too. "Sorry. Only if things aren't all they might be at home, Elly, don't let Algy go and take advantage of it."

"He's not that sort," said Eleanor.

"Well, don't entice him to be."

Eleanor laughed again. "Every bachelor is a Lothario to his sister," she said. "Let's change the conversation. Have you seen Edyth Pye since she married?"

That concluded Algy for the evening. Eleanor supposed she must let Diana know that he was going to turn up next day, but she awaited a more propitious moment. Diana still subconsciously fretted. Why was Eleanor here? Because Algy had sent her. Why had he sent her? Algy might have conceived some intrigue involving this visit. But why had Eleanor consented? She was hating it. Diana could see her hating it. Hating it, even when she calmed down and said her head was quite all right now, and changed the subject, and laughed and devastated the good repute of poor Edyth Pye.

They strolled out presently across the dell; returned and had a meal at seven. Diana explained about the bed to Eleanor and told her to occupy the bedroom, and that she herself would sleep in a chair in the parlour. They went early to bed. Intermittently, they engaged

in rather aimless conversation, embracing many subjects. But not embracing Algy.

So here is a cottage in the depths of a Somerset vale, with four rooms and one bed, and with two women as its only occupants. And the Chinese, those kite-flying, sign-writing philosophers, have designed a character to depict in their etymology the word "discord"; a character which is nothing more nor less than the drawing of two women alone in a little house. No fools they.

CHAPTER V

URBAN

LOUISE, returning from Paddington, found her husband doing absolutely nothing, like some patiently tethered beast; tethered to the morning room by his *Times*. He cocked a wary eye up at her. She looked as if she might be in a pretty busy sort of frame of mind. She confirmed this impression.

"Now! I've seen her off. He wasn't there or in the train. He'll no doubt be going down by car. I should like to keep him under observation, but I can't do everything by myself, and I've had an invitation to go out this afternoon, and I don't see how I can refuse. However, it's quite obvious what the game is. He'll be down after her to-day. The sister is either in it or being used as a sort of decoy. I don't mean decoy. I mean the other thing—pretext. Now!"

Willy rose with a noise, half a groan and half a grunt, like that which issues from a tired dog.

"It's all very well to say 'Now!' You've left it too late to do anything now. She's gone and the harm's done. And if she's such hot stuff as all that there probably isn't a sister in the cottage at all."

"She got a letter from the sister and I saw the postmark," said Louise, with a superior smile for this Watson of a colleague. "As for it being too late, it isn't too late at all. Only I didn't take any really serious steps until they were absolutely called for."

"Oh, good lord," said Willy. "What do you intend doing?"

"The first thing I'm going to do is to wire Reggy."

"To wire Reggy?"

"Certainly."

"Louise, this is asking for the most appalling and howling row. What can you——?"

"I meant to send the wire on my way back here, but I forgot. You'd better sit down and write it out for me."

"I absolutely refuse to be mixed up in this."

"You're not being mixed up. Writing a telegram out for me doesn't mix you up. Sit down and write. It will get to Reggy by this afternoon and he can catch the night boat if he wants to. I rather wish I hadn't said I'd go out this afternoon; still, nothing very much can happen just at the moment. Are you ready to take down?"

Willy was not ready to take down. He remained standing in front of the writing table pulling the lobe of his ear.

Willy essayed one last excuse.

"Aha!" he said, "you don't know Reggy's address."

"Aha, my aunt!" said Louise, vigorously. "I got it from Eleanor herself."

"Oh, what's the use?" soliloquized Willy, and sat.

"Now, take this down," said Louise. "Bingham. Roi——"

"What? He's in France somewhere, isn't he?"

"That's just what I say, Roi——"

"What?"

"Err-oo-ah——"

"You mean 'Roo,' don't you? French for 'street'?"

"I mean what I say. Bingham, Err-oo-ah Ed-oo-ar——"

"Here, hold on. What's all this—erroo, erroo? I don't get this."

"Err-oo-ah—'King!' Err——"

"King? Oh, you mean 'Wah.'"

"King Edward the Seventh Hotel. Err-oo-ah Ed-oo-ar Sept Hotel."

"Oh, righto. I see now. Wah Edward the Set. Yes?"

"Pareeee," said Louise.

"All right. Yes?"

"Now. 'Sorry to have to report Gascoyne turned up again and after Eleanor who——'"

"Hi, hi, hi. Boil it down, dash it. It's expensive."

"Begin again," said Louise. "From the beginning —'Gascoyne again attentive Eleanor who responds. Think it my duty wire and report. She gone his sister cottage Somerset to-day——' Have you got that?"

"What? No. I thought you were just sort of practising. Besides, you can't go and send a wire like that."

"If you think you can send a better one, go on."

"I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with sending a wire at all. If I *had* to wire I'd simply say —er—'Better come home, serious news Eleanor.'"

"Oh. Then he would immediately think some serious accident had happened to his wife."

"H'm. Well, so it may have by the time he gets back," said Willy, philosophically.

"Begin again," said Louise.

Eventually the telegram was completed. Willy was bidden to rehearse it. He made his dog noise again

and sat round; but rather spoilt the effect of the telegram by interspersed commentaries of his own.

"Bingham. Wah Edward Set Hotel, Paris. Sorry inform you Gascoyne—I don't believe you ought to mention names really—back and attentive Eleanor. Have definite proof—you haven't—she not averse—I absolutely wash my hands of this. They have arranged meeting cottage Somerset—that's pure guesswork too, and for all you know the sister is a very respectable woman and wouldn't countenance it even if they did intend to—return at once to prevent. Louise. There you are; and if you choose to push stuff like that about all over the telegraph wires in two countries you can do it on your own responsibility."

"Give it to me," said Louise. "I will go and send it at once."

She went at once and sent it.

In the afternoon Willy went again to Lords, where he was bored but at least independent.

And Louise took a small Nux Vomica, and crossed herself, and went to play Mah-Jongg with Mrs. Strathbean.

Algy was as yet in two minds as to whether he should make South Ditherton that day or an early start the next. At noon he proceeded to a garage in Jermyn Street and tentatively tuned up his merry carburettor. He returned to his rooms after lunching at his club. At the sound of his latchkey his servant, Lemon, hurried to the door and met him with a confidentially hushed announcement. Captain Dumfoil was in the sitting room.

"The dashing Guardee," said Algy to himself. "What does *he* want, I wonder. All right, Lemon."

Algy had now occupied these rooms for several years. A narrow passage ran the length of them, and from this three doors gave access to his respective apartments, sitting room, bedroom, bathroom. There was only one door on the other side of the passage, and this, at the end farthest from the main entrance, led to a small room which served as a butler's pantry. Here Lemon ironed trousers and pessimistically studied form.

Lemon was a recently married ex-soldier, willing but depressed. He went home to sleep; home being a couple of rooms above some mews off Curzon Street. None of Algy's meals, except breakfast, for which Lemon and a gas-ring were jointly responsible, was taken on the premises.

Algy found his present visitor stolidly awaiting him in the sitting room, an unwonted and, apparently, rather unwanted guest. Algy pulled a little grimace on the threshold, but greeted Captain Dumfoil cordially enough.

"Hallo, Dumfoil!"

"Hallo, young man!"

"What brings you here?" asked Algy. "Have a drink?"

"Oh, no, thank yer," said Captain Dumfoil.

"Oh, all right. Cigars, cigarettes, chocolates?"

"No, no."

"Matches, magazines, cup of coffee, lemonade, chewing gum? No? You seem in merry mood. What's up?"

Captain Dumfoil stretched himself into an attitude suggestive of a desire to impress. He was a stuffy, hairy man of forty. Tradition dogged him. A generation ago the Captain Dumfoils of their day had

lounged, literally propped up by soirées. Into the frills of their shirt-fronts whiskers magnificently wept. Around them curvetted the coyly frisking crinolines. In the field of Mars almost ridiculously brave; quite ridiculously supine in the courts of Venus. The natural successor of these yawning bravos was Captain Dumfoil.

Fashion had long since, of course, removed the whiskers and also, in its turn, the supercessor of the whiskers, the moustache enormous. Captain Dumfoil contented himself with a square-cut continuation of the hair in his nostrils. In speech he was handicapped by a tongue too large for his mouth. His "s's" were splutters; his diphthongs a sheer mess.

"I haven't much time to spare," said Captain Dumfoil. "But I thought I'd just drop in and give you a gentle hint about something. And if you take my advice you'll listen."

"What's the matter with you? Have you come to deliver a moral lecture or something?" asked Algy.

"Now, listen, young feller-me-lad. It's about that place at Richmond."

This, in Captain Dumfoil's phraseology, was "Ripsmond." Algy looked puzzled for a second; then enlightenment spread over his countenance.

"Oh, Richmond? Oh, you mean Shady Nook?"

"Shady Nook, yes. And well named. I strongly advise both you and your aunt to give it up."

"Why?" expostulated Algy, taking his leisurely seat on the sofa. "It's all right. It's just like any other casino or gambling hell, whichever you choose to call it, according to the state of your luck."

"It isn't," rejoined Captain Dumfoil. "It's a rotten

hole. And the old merchant that runs it is a crook."

"Who? Phonk? What if he is? He can't defraud a whole roomful of people in broad nightlight."

"Can't he!"

"You've been stung," said Algy.

Captain Dumfoil shifted impatiently in his chair.

"You chuck it," he repeated. "Of course, I know what the matter is with you. You're under the influence of your aunt."

"Very good influence, too," said Algy. "Don't you, of all people, start saying things against my aunt. Who was it called the Publican names?"

"What publican?"

"The Publican and the Pharisee. Oh, I suppose you won't have heard of them. About the only publican you've never struck, I should think.'

"Ha!" said Captain Dumfoil. "I should think that even the Publican would have derived a little cold consolation from Mrs. Krabbe."

"What have you got against my aunt?"

"Nothing, nothing. But she gambles rather indiscriminately," said Captain Dumfoil, patronizingly.

"I know she gambles," said Algy. "She gambles like a film tenderfoot. What of it? So do you."

"Not at Shady Nook," said Captain Dumfoil. "Now, look here. If I tell you something, can I trust you to keep it absolutely dark?"

Algy made faces. "Well, I don't know," he replied. "You say it's something that concerns my aunt?"

"Yes, it does, in a way."

"Well, if it's a secret that concerns Auntie," said Algy, "you'd better not tell me; because I should naturally repeat it to her. What do you think?"

Dumfoil rose with the deliberate self-importance of a stage lawyer.

"In that case," he said, "I shall merely content myself with repeating—steer clear of Shady Nook."

Algy rose, too.

"Well, I'm sorry if you've let 'em do you down, Dumfoil," he said. "But I think Auntie and I can look after ourselves."

Captain Dumfoil tossed his head with a blunt laugh. He stood in the sitting-room doorway and massaged a Malacca cane with his wash-leather glove.

"From one who knows," he said. "That's all. Later on, perhaps, I may be able to be a little more talkative about it."

"Oh, perish the thought," said Algy.

This concluded the interview.

Lemon was hovering in the passage to let the visitor out. Algy called him into the sitting room.

"Are my things packed, Lemon?"

"No, sir. You said——"

"I know. That's all right. I think I shall probably push off this afternoon. I shall just pop over and say good-bye to Mrs. Krabbe first. I shall be away for about a week, I expect. So you'll be able to be at home most of the time. That'll be convenient for you just now, won't it?"

"Yes, sir," assented Lemon, gloomily.

"By the way, how is your wife keeping?"

"Thank you, sir," said Lemon, "very patient, she is. The event is imminent, as the saying goes."

"Well, you can be there most of the time; only just look in occasionally, you understand?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Righto, then. Now, just get my things packed, and I'll go and see Mrs. Krabbe."

Mrs. Krabbe, though partaking of a late luncheon, was not in the dining room of her house in Hertford Street, but in her bedroom. She was, in point of fact, in the bed, a massive Jacobean affair, furnished with such a wealth of mattresses that Mrs. Krabbe appeared to be quite high in the air. Pillows not only supported her at the back but propped her up at the flanks. Her wig rested candidly on a stand near the window; but she was wearing a boudoir cap, tilted at a coquettish angle over her prominent Roman nose. She was eating salmon fish cakes and reading the *Morning Post* through an eyeglass.

To her came Denise, the discreet and dexterous, a French maid with as many secrets at the back of her head as there were pins at the back of her dainty apron. To her came Denise, knocked, stood, and awaited the august attention.

This was granted presently in the form of what can only be described as an eating stare.

Mr. Algy was below and desired audience. Mrs. Krabbe nodded, pushed her boudoir cap a trifle farther over her nose, and resumed her reading.

"Hallo, darling!" said Algy, arriving cheerfully and stick-swingingly upon the scene.

He advanced to the bed and kissed his aunt, who received the salute unemotionally.

"Sorry not to have seen much of you for the last few days," he said. "And not to be going to for the next few."

"Why? Where are you off to?" demanded Mrs. Krabbe, in her singular voice which was a sort of trilling

croak, not altogether unlike the sound of an old gentle man gargling.

"I'm driving down to the country for a day or two."

"Oh," said Mrs. Krabbe. "Love affair?"

"No. At least—no, not exactly."

"Oh, rubbish! What kind of a love affair? Speckled or plain? Kensington Gardens or the Metropole, Brighton?"

"Nothing, Auntie. Simply I've sent someone down to keep Diana company, and I'm going down there, too."

"Sent her to Diana!" said Mrs. Krabbe, in puzzled tones. "What on earth have you done that for? Are you afraid of going too far, or something?"

"No, Auntie. It's quite a Platonic affair."

"M'yes," said Mrs. Krabbe, doubtfully. "I don't believe in that stuff. Who is she?"

"Eleanor Bingham," said Algy.

Mrs. Krabbe performed elaborate research work at the back of her teeth with a forefinger.

"Damn these fish balls," she said. "And who's she?"

"You know. Eleanor Delaney."

"Oh. She's married."

"Yes."

"Only just married."

"Yes. Last autumn."

"Where's her husband?"

"Abroad."

"H'm."

"But as I tell you, Auntie, it's nothing—like that. She's going to keep Diana company, and I——"

"Keep off it," said Mrs. Krabbe. "You don't want

to trot about with young married women. It isn't sporting and it's very seldom sincere."

"But I tell you, it's not that sort of thing."

"Then it's poodlefaking, which is worse," said Mrs. Krabbe. "Oh, don't tell me. You may not intend to trip up. And then one day there you are together and the opportunity is there and you think—'Oh, well——' and something happens just like an accident and then you're sorry. I know what I'm talking about. I've done it myself before now."

Algy shook his head.

"Not in this case," he said. "Besides the opportunity *won't* be there, and I wouldn't take advantage of it if it was. Diana and she are going to be together at old Benbow's cottage."

"And where are you going to be?"

"I don't know yet."

"Don't you go, boy," said Mrs. Krabbe.

"I must. I've promised. Besides, I want to."

"Who have you promised? Diana?"

"No. I tell you, Eleanor's an absolutely straight girl."

"Married a fat man, didn't she?"

"What? Well, yes, she——"

"With a lot of money?"

"Yes."

"Don't go," said Mrs. Krabbe.

"I'm going, Auntie. I'm sorry."

"I never knew you were such a fool, Algy."

"I'm not a fool. Nor's she."

"All right, then. You don't often require advice. I suppose that's why you won't take it when you get it. It's a mug's game. It's worse than that; it's a

mean game. You'd better clear out now. I want to get up."

"You don't understand, Auntie——"

"There's nothing," said Mrs. Krabbe, "connected with, or suggestive of, any form of impropriety that I don't understand from A to Z. Now, then. Do you want to see me in my bath?"

"Not in the least," said Algy.

"Very well, then. Get out, there's a good boy."

"Half a second. There was something else I wanted to tell you. What was it? Oh, yes. What's to-day? Wednesday?"

"Yes. Why?"

"To-morrow's Thursday. You'll be going to the Nook to-morrow night, I suppose?"

"I daresay. Why?"

"Nothing particular. But I've just had rather a queer visit from Dumfoil. He came about the Nook."

"Dumfoil? The Nook? What's *his* trouble? He never goes there now."

"I know. And as for what his trouble is, I'm afraid I can't quite tell you. He's an insidious sort of bird. He's the kind of man who can never tell you anything without tapping your waistcoat buttons with his cigarette holder. But I'd rather think that he was hinting at the play at the Nook being crooked."

"Much obliged to him," said Mrs. Krabbe. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"He said that old Phonk is a crook."

"Well, who does Captain Dumfoil expect to find running a gambling joint? The Archbishop of Canterbury?"

"Phonk has never tried to take any advantage of *you*, has he?"

"Advantage of *me?*" croaked Mrs. Krabbe, in a subdued, incredulous voice. "Advantage of *me?* He'd better try. He'd be sorry for it."

"Well, but with all said and done, Auntie, what could one do?" asked Algy, who appeared grudgingly to share to a certain extent Captain Dumfoil's views on Mr. Phonk.

"I know what *I'd* do," replied Mrs. Krabbe, promptly. "I'd make his life a misery for him, and he knows it. Why, I could have him kicked out of every indecent club in London."

"Seriously, though?"

"I am serious. No gaming-house keeper can afford to play crooked, and your Captain Dumfoil would know that if he had half my experience."

"You mean, he'd get shown up?"

"Of course, he would. Why, if this Phonk tried any dirty business with me, I'd show him up myself. My goodness, I should jolly well think so. The first sign of any jiggery-pokery there and I'd bring down the walls of his Shady Nook on him in a style that would make Joshua look like a cornet solo on a charabanc."

"All right, then," said Algy. "So long as you're satisfied it's all on the level."

"Of course, it's on the level. Captain Dumfoil's a bad loser, that's all."

"That's what I told him. Well, good-bye, Auntie."

"You're going now, are you?"

"Yes."

"With this Mrs. Chance-it, or whatever her name is nowadays?"

"Yes. She's not the kind of girl you think. Just because she married that stiff. So don't start that again."

"Well, I'd stop you if I could," said Mrs. Krabbe. "I tell you that straight. Go away then."

Algy went away in a mood rather aggressive for so amiable a youth. He went straight to Jermyn Street, and brought his car round to his rooms. Half an hour later, the two-seater was drinking Bath Road like wine.

Denise came over to Half Moon Street presently. Mrs. Krabbe had no note of Miss Richardson Gascoyne's address. Mr. Lemon would, no doubt, supply this. Mr. Lemon was, however, out. He returned to the rooms later in the evening, and again left them. Soon after he had again left them, back came Denise. Discovered Mr. Lemon's home address from the hall-porter. Mr. Lemon was not there. Mrs. Lemon, on the verge of great expectations, was there and glared with undisguised hostility at a young foreign woman coming and asking for her husband in this manner, especially at so tactless a moment. Could give no information.

Denise went back once more to Half Moon Street. Left a message with the hall-porter. Mr. Lemon was to ring up Mrs. Krabbe. Lemon reappeared in Half Moon Street at six. Rang up Mrs. Krabbe. Mrs. Krabbe was out. So was Denise. Only the cook was in. Knew nothing of the matter regarding which the person on the telephone was talking. It was past eight o'clock before Mrs. Krabbe got Diana's address.

During the afternoon a telegraph boy came swinging and whistling up to the Pipers' flat. So that when Willy came back from Lord's he found the telegram propped against the stand for hat brushes on the hall table, took it up doubtfully, as one takes up a bee presumably dead, glanced at the contents and said, "Oh, utter hell!"

So that when Louise came in, all fatigued and heated from harbouring red dragons and punging her opponent's wind, she triumphantly closed down upon Willy and flourished the telegram in his face. It was from Paris.

Piper 6 Gloucester Buildings London Angelterre
Cannot possibly return until to-morrow till then you have my authority take all measures you consider necessary

REGINALD

"I know," said Willy. "I've read it. Look here, that has gone and done quite enough harm without your doing any more."

Louise disregarded him entirely. She stood in the dining-room doorway and eyed the telephone speculatively.

"I must find out whether that young man's left," she mused. "What's the time now? Six. Ye-es——"

She advanced into the dining room and took up the telephone directory. Willy could not be said to stand and watch her, for his eyes were on the ceiling.

She called up Algy's number. A male voice answered.

"Oh. Is that Mr. Richardson Gascoyne?"

"No, this is his manservant speaking."

"Oh. Erm—yes. I'm—er—— Oh, has he gone yet?"

"Pardon?"

"Mr. Richardson Gascoyne told me he was leaving town to-day for the country. I'm a friend of his. I —er—only wanted to know whether he'd gone."

"Yes, he's gone, madam."

"Oh, he *has?*"

"Yes, madam."

"Oh. Yes. I see. Yes. Thank you. What time did he go?"

"Early this afternoon. Excuse me—that's not Mrs. Krabbe, is it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mrs. Krabbe."

"Missed his cab?"

"No, 'm. Is that—are you Mrs. Krabbe?"

"Oh. No, no. No. No, I'm—no."

"Oh, I beg pardon."

"Not at all. All right, thank you. Good-bye."

"Here, I say, you know; this is absolute barefaced lying," said Willy.

"Nonsense," said Louise. "It is diplomacy. One has to meet guile with guile."

"What's the next bit of guile on the programme?" asked Willy.

"I'm going out."

"Where to?"

"I thought you said you didn't want to be mixed up in this?"

"I don't."

"Then you'd better let me do things my own way without asking questions. I've got an idea. I'll tell you afterward what I've done, very likely. I shall probably be back in time for dinner. I may be a little late."

"Oh-h! What *are* you going to perpetrate now? All right. I'll go out myself to the club for an hour."

A few minutes later Willy descended from the Tube at Down Street and walked into Piccadilly toward his club. Just as he was about to turn up the club steps he found himself face to face with another man; a plump, bronzed man of about forty-five, with a neat moustache and a lingering smile of amused tolerance for the whirl of a world in which he seemed, in some indefinite way, a novice. Willy brightened up at the sight of him.

"Hallo!" cried Willy. "Henry!"

Henry. The youngest Bingham. Louise's inconsiderable young brother. Reginald's alleged, but really utterly futile and negligible, younger brother. Yet here, in a sudden apparition, you found all the qualities of which you had thought the Binghams devoid. All Reginald's share—all Louise's share. Good humour, generosity, the ability to laugh, irresolution, incompetence, non-success—all epitomized in sleepily gentle eyes and in a lazy smile.

Willy clapped a hand to this Henry's shoulder and drew him into the club. And lugged him into the plot.

CHAPTER VI

THE TELEGRAM IN THE BOSOM

VERY early on Thursday morning Eleanor sprang into a startled sitting attitude, wildly awakened, violently jerked from sleep into baffling surroundings; her mind half benumbed, half horribly alert. So may the soul of a sinner awaken to the frightening surprises of Hades.

Who was she and where? Then sleep fell from her brain. She returned to life. She was Eleanor Bingham. And she was in Mr. Hole's bed.

But part of the horror remained. What fiend had shrieked her into consciousness? The fiend shrieked again, and Eleanor relapsed, her panic giving place swiftly to wrath; while Mr. Hole's rooster continued conceitedly to challenge the first glimmer of our important Thursday.

Bird accursed! Why hadn't Diana warned her? It was what o'clock? Eleanor took a watch from the chair beside her bed and peered into it. A quarter to four. Further sleep was, she knew, impossible. A quarter to four—five—six—seven—eight; four hours until normal and reasonable daytime. Four hours. And she would lie awake and cocks would crow and birds would twitter and cows would moo. Every morning for a week. No. No, no.

She had fallen asleep with mischief on her pillow.

The little devil was still there. His insinuations now took a humorous turn; embittered humour was in her heart. The joke was at her own expense. She, who had made such a to-do about being herself and about being natural and about refusing to let her in-laws have their own way, had struck a blow for liberty and for her self-esteem. And this was where she had, in that good cause, arrived. This! It was really funny. Bitterly funny.

She would go back to town that day. That really was sensible; that really was herself. She would leave this place, Chool, this day, Thursday. It might hurt Diana's feelings, but she'd have been a jolly sight too considerate about people's feelings. She would up and be herself, and if she grieved and startled and shocked people's feelings they could lump it. Oh, yes, the rooster could crow. Go on. Crow, you brute! It was the last time he'd keep *her* awake at four in the morning.

She'd wait until Algy came down and then she'd get him to take her back to town in his car. She'd go home. And stay home. That is to say, she would make her own home her base, during a short, glorious, personally misconducted tour of good old London. The little devil simply chortled at this. "Even if you go a bit beyond the limit, you've been driven to it. You can always feel that. Think of what you've tried to put up with. Reggy sneaking round to Louise and getting you tied up there. Louise's, after dinner. This little effort of your own to extricate yourself with the best intentions! This cottage! Diana! The rooster! Oh, be damned! Off you go, my dear, and be really yourself and let it all rip. After all, this is

only what's been in the back of your mind ever since you married."

She thought over her marriage, humorously still; smiling to herself as she lay in bed with her hands clasped behind her head. She compared her marriage mentally to taking a flight in an aeroplane. To a sedate and ordered citizen suddenly making up his mind to have a dart at it, just to see what it was like. And being up there, finding himself up there, clinging and wondering whether he could keep his breath and being hurtled along in the wind, and all before he had really quite definitely made up his mind whether he'd go up or not. But the aeroplane flight didn't last long; couldn't. The citizen returned and resumed his hat and his normal citizenship. Or crashed.

Something wrong there though. Because if she climbed out of the aeroplane and went off on her own again, that would mean a crash. So it didn't quite pan out somehow. What did it matter? She was half asleep anyhow, and would be quite asleep if it hadn't been for that confounded cock, so if the analogy didn't come quite right, what the dickens did that matter?

Anyhow, one thing was certain. London to-day. Real London. No Louise. No Diana. Go on, you—crow away!

She fell asleep again from time to time, but it was fitful sleep between jerking, startled awakenings. Every time she opened her eyes they grew brighter at the thought of buzzing away in that little car. How intolerably slowly the hours passed. She got out of bed and wandered about the room; sat for five minutes in a senseless chair; up again and to the window,

through which the light of a dull, inhospitable day was now fully illuminating the deeply rural surroundings.

At seven Diana woke up in Mr. Hole's sitting-room chair. She made tea and crept upstairs. Eleanor had got back into bed and was, apparently, asleep, but she jumped at the creak of the door.

"Sorry to wake you up so early," said Diana. "It's only seven. Here's some tea. Sleep as long as you like."

"Don't worry," said Eleanor. "I woke at a quarter to four. Doesn't that cock crowing disturb you in the mornings? Or at night, rather?"

"I didn't know it did crow," said Diana.

"Never mind," said Eleanor. "It doesn't matter now. It might have been worse, I suppose. I was expecting cows to moo, but they haven't. I suppose they don't do it in the early morning."

"Well, have your tea," said Diana. "And if you like to get up fairly soon I'll hot the water up. I shan't make it awfully hot, but good enough for a bath this weather."

Eleanor felt frozen to the marrow and was tempted to say so, but restrained herself. It wasn't for much longer.

There were exactly four rooms in April Cottage. As you entered, the sitting room or parlour was on the left, and this, like the bedroom above it, ran the whole length of the building. On the right of the front porch was the combined kitchen, pantry, and scullery. Between parlour and kitchen ran a passage ending in a back door, where a plot scarcely broad enough to accommodate a dustbin separated the cottage from the bank of the towering grove in the rear of the establish-

ment. Halfway along the passage the staircase shot upwards like a ladder, and the greater portion of the space above the kitchen was required for a landing. There was, however, a small room, used undesignedly as a bathroom, across the landing from the bedroom.

The parlour and bedroom were of quite reasonable size; but, while the bedroom was furnished with frugal severity, the parlour possessed many of the properties of a storeroom. The walls were lined with books, many of them very dull and nearly all of them very dilapidated. Mr. Hole's own contribution to literature was represented by reams of manuscript which had been stuffed into the lower shelves of one of the bookcases—sheaves of foolscap, scored and underlined and blotted and, in places, disfigured by the attentions of a critical mouse.

The room had a large open fireplace with a fire ready built, for April Cottage became very chill after sunset in the hollow of the hill, and Mr. Hole was no Spartan. In the centre of the parlour was a round table on which he partook of his one meal every day, before and after which occasion the round table became submerged in literature.

The aged, long-suffering armchair in leather formerly red, which had been Diana's bed on this occasion. Two stern fiddle-back wooden chairs. A great solid writing table in the window. An old black oak sideboard. The rest—books. Rows of fat, uniform, worm-eaten books with the labels peeled from their bindings, standing stolid in outraged dignity, like a line of aldermen in disgrace and stripped of their insignia. Books without any bindings at all, or with the bindings held hazardously around them by string, as the trousers are held

round a tramp. Books in prose, in poetry. Books in Latin. And below them the longest book of them all, not yet a book and never to be a book, colossal and furious work of a mistaken lifetime.

Diana had declared a war of cleanliness on the parlour, thereby incurring the deep suspicion and animosity of Mrs. Easy. Many of the books had fallen to pieces in her hand, but she had persevered, and the room now wore quite a cheerful aspect with flowers in a jam pot and a dainty check tablecloth. Oil lamps and candles were, of course, the only means of lighting the cottage, but fortunately at this time of year daylight lasted throughout the waking hours. A well in the front garden supplied the water. In the front garden also was a small coal-shed. These, the fowl-run and an intricate liaison of grass and flower-bed formed the grounds of April Cottage, which were bordered by a privet hedge. At the angle of the privet hedge the little road from above joined the grassy lane which bounded the dell.

A gate, green with moss, connected the side road with the short gravel path to the porch. Away to the other side of the cottage was a long tract of spongy meadow with ferns revelling in the marsh-land in the cup of the hill. There were queer birds' eggs to be had for the asking within fifty yards of April Cottage. For a couple of cigarette cards little Easy would show you a dozen likely places.

Little Easy's mother, leaving her cottage at about nine o'clock on this Thursday morning, looked up and worked her elastic nose at the heavens. She then reëntered her cottage and again emerged, armed with an heirloom in the shape of one of those umbrellas em-

ployed by commissionaires at wet receptions. She proceeded along the upper road towards South Ditherton, gaining the corner of the little road down to April Cottage just in time to see Pitcher's motor van rounding the bend and steering down through the trees. Mrs. Easy halted and her nostrils played like those of a terrier. Pitcher's, the South Ditherton furniture shop? What could *they* be delivering in a van to April Cottage?

Mrs. Easy was sorely tempted to follow and investigate. She had cast the dust of the cottage from her elastic-sideds—but only because of this young woman. Not because of Mr. Hole. She reckoned she still owed it to Mr. Hole to keep an eye on things. He had left his address at Harrogate with her in case of emergencies. Suppose she discovered some outrage in course of perpetration at April Cottage! She would not hesitate to let Mr. Hole know. It was her plain duty. She had already felt very inclined to report the matter of the tidying-up of the parlour.

She walked on to the corner and stood deliberating. The van had disappeared round the bend of the hill. Then there came from the rear the sound of one whistling—not with the lips, but through the teeth. Mrs. Easy swung round. A telegraph boy, aimlessly stunting on a red bicycle, extended one confident hand to a handle-bar to avoid collision. But did not stop whistling.

"Here!" said Mrs. Easy, sharply.

The telegraph boy slithered a boot upon the road and turned.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Easy.

"Cottidge," replied the telegraph boy, and jerked his head in that direction.

"'Ave you got a telegraph then?" said Mrs. Easy.

"That's ri',' said the telegraph boy, producing a telegram from his wallet and studying the address with caution.

"Oo is it addressed to?" demanded Mrs. Easy.

The telegraph boy had another look. "Dinah Robinson Crusoe," he replied.

"Let me see," said Mrs. Easy, advancing and appropriating the telegram.

"Richardson Gascoyne—that's that young woman that's there. H'm. Fer her, is it? H'm."

Very grudgingly she restored the telegram to the boy.

"Very well, then, take it and give it to her and do yer work sharp and proper," she said. "Don't stop and hang about here."

The telegraph boy, hardened by many dealings with the young ladies in post offices, ignored this taunt and went his way.

But this settled Mrs. Easy. She followed.

A thunderstorm was apparently brewing in the sky. A minor thunderstorm was, Eleanor thought, very likely brewing in the cottage. She shrank from offending Diana. But her mind was quite made up. It was rather difficult, all the same, to come out with the information that she was going back to London forthwith. She thought it over during breakfast and decided to postpone the announcement. It might even be propitious to wait until Algy turned up.

She was very agreeable to Diana and by way of showing, in advance, that there was no ill-feeling, she entered gladly into the morning housewifery. She said

she would wash up the breakfast things while Diana made the bed.

Eleanor was accordingly in the kitchen when Pitcher's van drew up at the gate. She glanced out and saw the elderly driver descend and begin heaving something off the back of the van. What was this? Oh, dear! The other bed. The other bed would not be wanted now. She ought to tell Diana before Diana accepted, assembled, and made the bed, that the bed would be untenanted. It was very awkward. Diana had already come running excitedly downstairs and was at the gate. Eleanor could not follow her out and begin wrangling with her in the baffled company of Pitcher's driver. Better let it be. Eleanor withdrew into the kitchen and hid her face in the washing-up.

Pitcher's driver was very, very like a toad. He suffered from a chronic affliction of the throat which made all he said appear very confidential. He put his face close to Diana's, and said,

"I've brought ye yer bed."

"Good!" said Diana. "Bring it in, please."

"Ah!" whispered Pitcher's driver. "Signal-arnded, I don't know that I can manage she."

"Oh, is it heavy? I'll help you," said Diana.

"Thank'ee," said Pitcher's driver.

"Oh, but I don't want a double bed. A single one, I said."

"This bed," said the driver, placing his hand upon the corpse of the bed, dismembered and swathed within the van, "she be the only bed in the shop. For hire, that be. That's what she be. The only one."

"But I haven't room for a double bed. Let me

think, now. One moment! You'd better come with me, and I'll consult my friend."

She went indoors to the kitchen. The driver, stooping very toad-like, followed and cocked an appreciative eye on Eleanor from the kitchen doorway.

"Eleanor, they've only got a double bed on hire——"

"Oh, if the bed won't do——" began Eleanor, readily.

She caught the driver's eye. No, she really couldn't make this the opportunity for her revelation. "Do what you think best, dear," she said.

"Well, we'd better take it, I suppose," said Diana. "There's room for it."

"Is there? I shouldn't have thought there was—for another large bed. The room isn't as big as all that."

"I tell you what we might do," said Diana. "If it's the only bed we can get, we might share it, and send the single bed to be stored. That would make enough room."

"Er—yes, but—— All right. Just as you think."

"Of course, I've only got single sheets though," continued Diana. "I don't know what to do about that."

"You can 'ire 'er clothes for 'er," said the driver.

"Thanks, I don't care much about hired bedclothes; do you, Eleanor?"

"What? No. I——"

"You can 'ire new material at the shop," said the driver.

"Are you sure?"

"Ah," said the driver, "new material."

"Well," said Diana, "bring the bed upstairs. And

I'll take the single one back to be stored. I'll go on your van. Then I can see about the sheets and things, and you can bring me out again. You don't mind, do you, Eleanor?"

"No," said Eleanor. "I think you'd much better go and see about it. Of course, really, I——"

"What?" asked Diana, pausing in the doorway. The driver also paused and peered inquisitively.

"Nothing," said Eleanor.

Diana returned with the driver to the front gate and the van and the bed. Here they were greeted by teeth-whistling. The telegraph boy remained on his bicycle, supporting himself by the van.

Diana took the telegram; a little frown gathering. Algy, no doubt.

Diana Richardson Gascoyne April Cottage Chool near South Ditherton Som

Do your best to stop any funny business between Algy and that woman stopping with you he says platonic I know better so don't put up with any hokey pokey

AUNTIE

She gave a little introspective nod to herself over this; a little tightening of the eyes. "No answer," she told the telegraph boy, who pushed himself off from the van, performed a stunting half-circuit and laboured off up the hill. Diana placed the telegram in her bosom and turned to assist Pitcher's driver with the bed.

From the cover of a convenient bush by the roadside Mrs. Easy took astonished stock of what followed. She saw the young woman and Pitcher's driver carry into the cottage the component parts of a large brass bedstead and a voluminous roll of mattress. After a

considerable time had elapsed, the driver brought from the cottage the outraged segments of Mr. Hole's bedstead and, in a haphazard cone of desecration, Mr. Hole's mattress.

A double bed. A double bed taken into the cottage and the single bed removed. And a telegram. This young woman was expecting company. Did Mr. Hole know of this? Would Mr. Hole have given consent to company at his cottage? Very unlike him if he had. Did he, in any case, know of this bed-shifting business? Preposterous! Never in this world would he have consented to such a thing. And, even if the young woman was expecting company and had obtained leave to have company, why so pointedly and with such careful preparation a double bed in lieu of an extra single? Who was she going to share the double bed with?

Pitcher's driver placed the single bed aboard the van, climbed into the driver's seat, and waited. Mrs. Easy waited, too, wide-eyed and nose-working in the thicket.

Diana put her hat on thoughtfully in the bedroom. So her suspicions were well-founded. Even Auntie, who was no stickler in such matters, had been moved to protest. The question was should she go straight to Eleanor and have it all out now? After all, there was no sign of Algy here. She had been rather hot-headed in the matter of Algy last night, and Eleanor had been very resentful and difficult. It was rather asking for it to launch an accusation before there were any grounds for it. Wiser to wait, at least, until she returned from South Ditherton with the bedding.

Eleanor, as we know, was not without her quandary.

She was in the parlour now. Diana looked in on her way down.

"I shan't be long," she said. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes, of course. Rather."

"Anything you want?"

"No. Oh, you might bring some papers out."

"Yes, I will. Oh, and, by the way, what do you like to drink? I haven't anything here; but I'll get some wine ordered if you'll tell me what sort."

"No, thanks," said Eleanor. "Don't you go ordering wine."

"I may as well. I'm going to the shop, in any case. I want to get some brandy. I've always forgotten it up to now. But they say you should always have brandy in the house. Besides, it's useful for cooking."

"Well, don't go ordering things for me."

"You've only got to say the word," said Diana, turning.

"Have I? Well, then—Diana——"

"Yes?"

"Er—is that man still waiting to drive you in the van?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's all right. Nothing."

"No, but what?"

"Would you get me some cigarettes?"

"Yes. Is that all you wanted to say?"

"That's all."

Diana fidgeted for a moment in the narrow hall. Her fingers went to her bosom. She drew the telegram forth, then put it back. When she came back would do. Besides, she had no evidence of anything.

"Well, good-bye," she called, and went.

From her hiding place Mrs. Easy saw her close the gate and climb into the van. Oh, so she'd locked up the cottage, had she, and was going off to South Ditherton, was she? Probably to meet the double-bedded friend. Very well, then. But Mrs. Easy would come and have another look at this later on. If the young woman thought she could make this sort of use of Mr. Hole's cottage without his getting to know, she'd never made a greater mistake in her life. Never a greater.

The van climbed past the ambush and went its way. Mrs. Easy regained the roadway and ascended the hill again. She proceeded toward South Ditherton at a steady pace. Her walk was stiff and rather crouched, like that of some beast of prey, cautious lest it should forewarn an artless victim. Halfway to South Ditherton the threatened thunderstorm broke, and her appearance became even more extraordinary beneath her commissionaire's umbrella.

The garage of the Ring o' Bells was situated alongside that hotel. Algy, having slept and breakfasted late, had actually started his car running when the first warning clap of thunder sounded above his head. He said, "Oh, curse this!" and went indoors to get his mackintosh. A second or two later the furniture van thudded slowly past the Ring o' Bells, and, by the time Algy emerged and set off with his nose toward Chool, Diana was in Pitcher's.

CHAPTER VII

MAIDEN SHAME

PUCK finds his comedies ready-made; a haphazard, extempore producer he. He does not even select his company, but presses into bewildered service any unfortunate who may chance to cross his path. An imperious little Titania may find herself thus wildly intrigued; a stately, disconsolate Helena. You may observe querulous Lysander protesting in the toils. Even old, egregious Bully Bottom may presently blunder in upon the scene and—bless him—be translated.

In the club on Wednesday evening, while Willy related his sorry tale, Henry Bingham filled a very deliberate pipe, lit it, let it out, failed to notice for some time that it was out, relit it, let it out again, and knocked it out thinking that he had smoked it. All the while he listened and nodded and perpetually smiled. He appeared extremely inert. The very sight of him would have irritated Reginald like a flea.

"Yes," he said, at length. "I sympathize."

"Thanks," said Willy.

"Not with you, old man," said Henry. "At least, my sympathies with you are more or less permanent. No, I'm sorry for her."

"For Eleanor."

"Yes." He mused and began systematically to refill his pipe. "I rather like Eleanor," he added.

"So do I," said Willy, furtively, and through closed lips.

"She's a man's woman, I suppose," continued Henry. "Only at the moment it doesn't seem quite clear which man's."

"Don't know about that," said Willy. "Looks clear enough to me."

Henry stretched for a match; took one. Seemed to be struck by a thought just before striking the match, but at last struck it.

"This blighter's gone after her already, eh?" he asked.

"Yes. Louise discovered he pushed off in his car to-day."

"This sister? She's in it, you think? Seems a bit thick for a sister."

Willy shrugged.

"Society people, I suppose," he said, airily. "They'll do anything, won't they?"

"Sounds like it," admitted Henry, lighting his pipe.

"Mind you," he went on, after a good deal of puffing and of prodding the burning tobacco with his finger, "mind you, I think if Eleanor knew Reggy was on the scent she'd chuck it. Not for her own sake; for his. She didn't seem to me to be the kind of girl who'd go out of her way to be cruel to Reggy."

"She would have known if I'd had my way," said Willy. "Heaven knows what Louise is up to now. Women are damned unsporting, some of 'em."

"What I should like to see," said Henry, "is Louise utterly scored off and getting it full in the neck from Reggy for bringing him home. I should love to see

him arriving to-morrow, all fuming and sea-sick, only to find he'd been made a fool of."

"You wouldn't say that if you had to be left with Louise afterward."

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't think Eleanor deserved a chance. But all this conspiracy—— If only she got to know——"

"If she got to know what Louise had done," said Willy, "it would only get her back up, and then the worst would happen in any case."

Henry examined his pipe-stem doggedly. "She ought to be given the chance," he repeated. "By all the laws of fair play. If all this ended in a bust-up for her and Reggy and nobody had done a hand's turn to prevent it, I should feel very guilty." He paused. "What do you say the name of this place is, again?"

"April Cottage, South Ditherton. Why? You're not going to wire or anything?"

"N-no," said Henry. "A wire might only make things worse, unless it was frightfully carefully worded."

"Well, it's no good writing," said Willy. "By the time a letter got there it would either be too late or totally unnecessary. You follow my example, old man, and keep out of it. I must go home now. I shall be late for dinner. I'll let you know what happens."

"Righto," said Henry. "I say, don't let Louise know you've told me about this."

"No fear," said Willy. "And don't you tell her I told you. So long."

Henry returned to his hotel on foot and very deep in thought. On entering the hotel he stood and looked at the hall-porter as though he were trying to make up his mind to break some devastating news to that indi-

vidual. He then requested the loan of an A. B. C. time-table.

Though late for dinner, Willy was home before Louise. She arrived soon after eight. She made no reference to what she had been doing. Indeed, she did not return to the subject of Eleanor at all. Willy found small comfort in this. Louise was keen-eyed and complacent. She entertained her husband throughout dinner with little bright snatches of piffling conversation. When she remained silent she seemed lost in far-away reflections of the most gratifying kind.

Willy drooped moodily over the table, occasionally shooting a wary glance upward at her, as a cribbing schoolboy eyes the master's desk. What hate had she been committing now?

This state of affairs continued all the evening. When Louise had dined and taken a Dobbson's Settling Lozenge, she joined Willy in the drawing room, where she sat on the sofa, officially knitting; but every time he looked up from his Patience it was to find her gazing at the wall opposite to her with an expression of determined rapture worthy of some virgin of the Salvation Army.

Thus, until his bedtime, she baited him. At his bedtime he asked bluntly: "Tell me. What have you done about Eleanor?" And she replied, "I would rather say nothing at the moment. I have arranged something, but I've got to see how it pans out. It is very stuffy to-night, but don't forget to draw your dressing-room blinds. I saw that girl opposite you watching you last night while you undressed."

Like Charity, Willy suffered long, enduring all things. There were one or two foibles in Louise which he en-

dured with difficulty. He overlooked her habit of dosing herself with all manner of quack muck. At any rate, it meant that she had to keep pretty well, if only to justify the qualities of the muck. As for her religious practices, he regarded these with grave bewilderment, but he was the last man in the world to disparage Christianity in any form. Born of Louise's religious principles, however, was a habit that Willy detested. She cultivated certain outlandish and impossible acquaintances who were connected with the church at which she worshipped.

The church itself was not a good straightforward old Church of England such as Willy understood; where you go right ahead through the regular service with the psalms and the lessons and "Brief Life is here our portion" and—dash it, if he'd known that he wouldn't have come—the Litany, and the sermon about Martha and Mary, and "Hark, Hark, my Soul," and that's that. Oh, no. This church of Louise's was a very different concern. He had been there with her once, and never in his life had he felt so self-conscious and unnatural. To begin with he was separated from Louise, the sexes being kept strictly apart. There was a good deal of incense. It was very difficult to tell who were clergy and who weren't. But these friends——

There were two or three of them and they weren't gentlefolk. It was difficult to determine exactly what sort of people they were, and Louise herself was reticent about them. She visited them at their homes, wherever they may have been, and occasionally one or another of them came to the flat. They weren't like the poor people that Willy's mother and sisters used to district-visit in the old days; they were middle-class, confident

people. With them, apparently, Louise held a sort of spiritual intercourse blended with tea and chatter.

He protested once: "I say, Louise; who is that youth with the rabbit-teeth? I've caught him here once or twice before, and he always looks as if you've told him that I live here, too, but he isn't to take any notice. He looks rather a cad to me. Who is he?"

Louise had said, "He? Oh, a nice boy."

"What's his name?" asked Willy.

"His name? His name's Berty Pitts. I've rather taken him up. He's reading for the church."

"Oh, I see," said Willy. "I suppose you're helping him read."

And as he pulled down his blinds and started to undress himself on this particular evening, Willy pondered over some of the rather difficult and obscure traits in Louise. His own simple mind found it difficult to reconcile her very intense religious exercises with the spiteful and insidious methods she was employing over this miserable affair of Eleanor. Not that it was any use protesting. But she was like that over all sorts of things—over her health; over what she had been doing on any given day; over these damned friends of hers—always rather cautious and enigmatic at the best of times. This feller, Pitts. Willy didn't care a straw really; but all the same——

Transmission of thought this, perhaps. For in the next room Louise was thinking of her young friend Berty Pitts at that very moment. She had been thinking of him all the evening, of him and of her own subtle little strategy for the morrow. And she had, as we have seen, found these reflections very satisfactory.

Eleven o'clock the next morning found Louise for the

second day in succession on Number 1 Platform at Paddington. The 11.15 giant was again about to run a rejoicing course westward. Louise stood on the platform at the open window of a third-class carriage and exhorted its inmate.

"You quite understand, now, don't you? I want you to avoid asking questions or doing anything that might look suspicious. Only don't fail to find out who is there—whether these two people are there and whether the sister is there, too. You know more or less what to expect and you can soon find out what's going on. And, in any case, mind you ring me up as soon as you possibly can when you've found out. By tea-time you ought to be back at this place, South Ditherton, and there's sure to be a telephone there. The porters are coming along shutting doors now, so I won't wait. Good-bye. You've got that money and everything else you want? That's right. Good-bye."

She quitted the platform and the station with the hurried gait of relief at a ticklish job accomplished unobserved.

She would not have been unobserved, however, had her brother Henry been true to his traditions. But for once he had caught his train and had left London for South Ditherton nearly two hours earlier, by the 9.35.

There was a golden rule for pedestrians on the Chool Road. Mrs. Easy, though town-bred, had learnt to observe it. At the sound of the approaching car she sought the ditch, and stood in it behind an indignant rampart of umbrella.

To her surprise the car hove to. She raised the umbrella cautiously. From beneath the hood of the

car there peered the face of a young man who regarded Mrs. Easy with an air of critical hesitancy. For the fraction of a second Mrs. Easy flattered herself with apprehension as to his intentions.

"Can you please tell me the way to April Cottage?"

Mrs. Easy disciplined her features. So *this* was the visitor! Much as she had supposed—a young man. Ah, and what a type! A regular road-scorching, idle lover of disgracefulness. A typical liver in shame. And proud of it. Not hiding his iniquity under a bushel, as the scriptural saying went, but all blarsy and boasting of it. An undoer of women. A News-of-the-Worlder.

The double bed, eh? Yes, and that proud cat at the cottage. Mrs. Easy wasn't surprised a bit. She knew the sort. All—"don't you dare talk to me; I'm a lady, I am. I share beds with young men, but I remain a perfect lady, and don't you forget it." That sort. Oh, Mrs. Easy had known all along that this kind of thing was on the cards. All along.

She replied to Algy in the most disarming way, however.

"Yes, I can tell you. The first to the left and you'll find it at the foot of the 'ill."

"Oh, good! Thanks."

"It's Mr. 'Ole's cottage you mean, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"But Mr. 'Ole is not there, 'imself, jest now, you know."

"No, I know. That's quite all right, thanks," said the young man in a tone of, Mrs. Easy thought, complete satisfaction.

"There's a young lady there these days, looking after the place, so I believe," said Mrs. Easy.

"Yes, so do I," said Algy. "Good morning. Wet, isn't it?"

Off he shot, leaving Mrs. Easy piqued. She had been anxious to inform him that the young lady was out, in order to study the effect of this news upon him. He had evidently arrived earlier than she expected. She had gone into South Ditherton to meet him, and, as luck would have it, they had missed each other. On second thoughts, it was perhaps as well that she shouldn't appear too knowing. It might only put them on the alert. Because now, Mrs. Easy was absolutely decided as to her course of action.

One thing she could bank on with certainty. Mr. Hole had no knowledge of these goings-on. He would disapprove, and his disapproval would be expressed immediately and violently. When she got to South Ditherton she would send him a telegram, informing him that his cottage was being re-bedded.

She saw Diana in South Ditherton; saw her, moreover, in circumstances which only served to supply fresh and damning evidence of her guilty designs. Pitcher's van was still in attendance. It was drawn up outside Stagg's, the wine merchant's. The young woman was coming out of Stagg's, carrying two bottles of Hennessy's Three-Star Brandy and a flagon of Australian Burgundy. Under her arm was a large box of expensive cigarettes.

Mrs. Easy visualized with difficulty the scene of reckless abandon to be enacted beneath the modest roof of April Cottage that night. Fortunately, she had once

witnessed a cinema film of an at-home in New York, at which young women in bathing costumes (one-piece) disported themselves in a swimming-bath filled from a fountain with champagne. She was thus able to appreciate at least the spirit prompting the prospective orgy of Chool. She almost ran to the post office.

Pitcher's van rounded the last bend of the downward zigzag. "Ah!" exclaimed Diana. "Oo!" echoed the toad, and applied a shrieking brake. A very trim but very wet two-seater stood outside the gate of April Cottage in the rain.

"Thank you," said Diana. "I'll get down. You can get past and turn, can't you? You needn't wait. I'll manage my parcels."

She gathered together her bedclothes, her brandy, her Burgundy, her cigarettes, some newspapers, and a parcel of assorted groceries. The toad made ear-splitting noises with gears and manœuvred into departure. Diana turned at the gate to look again at the two-seater.

The aperture in its rear was open, and into it had been stuck one end of the portmanteau which she had helped to carry upstairs the night before. That, somehow, was the crowning injury. Diana recalled the fag of hoisting that portmanteau up the ladder of April Cottage, herself doing all the lifting and pulling while Eleanor trailed after her. Eleanor's end of the portmanteau had been on the stair-but-one below most of the time. And here the portmanteau was—repacked and back in Algy's car.

So Algy had turned up. And they had decided that they had better make a clean breast of what they were up to, and go off together. They must have come to

this decision pretty quickly. In fact, Eleanor must have run upstairs and packed directly Diana left the cottage. Evidently she had known all the time that Algy was about to arrive. She might have let Diana know, before the latter had gone to the trouble of getting beds and Burgundies. It was really rather surprising that they hadn't gone off already, merely leaving a note.

All this in a throb of indignation sharp as a sting. And the venom of the sting was the sight of that jutting and already saturated portmanteau—dumb lump of informative insolence.

They were waiting for Diana in the parlour, all ready mackintoshed, standing; Eleanor toe-tapping in impatience. There was an air of nervous, Gretna Green surrender about her, Diana thought. Her very attitude was a confirmation of Auntie's misgivings.

Diana entered the room without a word and put down her parcels. Eleanor began to gabble some apology heedlessly and taking the wrong intervals for breathing, like a schoolboy who knows his repetition.

"Oh, I don't mind your not staying," said Diana. "It doesn't hurt my feelings at all. I thought you wouldn't like this place. I don't myself. I'm only so sorry you had to come all this way for the sake of kidding your sister-in-law."

"I didn't, Diana; I fully inten——"

"Oh, and I don't mind your kidding your sister-in-law. She sounds rather the sort of person I should enjoy kidding, too. That's not the point."

"Well, what is the point, may I ask?"

"All right," said Diana, "let's get right to it. I'm awfully sorry if your marriage hasn't turned out a suc-

cess, Eleanor; but I'm blowed if you're going to lug Algy into it."

"Diana!"

"Oh, tripe!" said Algy. "Don't pay any——"

"I'm blowed if you're going to," cried Diana. "And if he is a big enough fool to allow himself to be lugged, then he's jolly well got to have someone to stand out and catch hold of the seat of his pants and lug him back again."

They stared at her, quite startled. She was erect and quivering. Hot spots were in her cheeks. Her eyes were ablaze.

"You look rather attractive in a state of fury, Diana," said Algy. "You ought to cultivate it. Only do try and find a reasonable cause for fury. There are plenty about."

Eleanor glanced out of the window at the rain and tucked up her mackintosh collar.

"Well, I'm sorry to have to go like this, and I've tried to say so, but you won't let me. And as for all this hot air about me and Algy—if you think——"

"I think the worst," said Diana. "There you are. That's flat."

"Flat," said Algy, "is a mild description of it, believe me."

"If you want to know," said Eleanor, "I'm going back to my own home at Prince's Gate."

"Go where you like," said Diana, "and do what you like, and do what your husband doesn't like. Only don't let him find out."

"I'm going to tell him exactly what I've been doing directly he gets back," said Eleanor.

"Oh," said Diana. "That's a nice prospect for you to look forward to, Algy."

"If you aren't a good enough sport——" began Algy.

"Oh, a sport!" cried Diana. "You're a couple of sports, aren't you? Motoring about in the rain on a sneaking little so-called love affair, and keeping well off the high road in case the sister-in-law should pop her head out of the hedge." She swung round on Eleanor. She was like a live torch being beaten out; words flew out of her like hot sparks.

"London to Chool one day with a great deal of fuss and preparation and advertisement. Chool back to London the next day in an oiling little secret two-seater. And I'm to be a sport. A sport! If you were a sport and were really in the least fond of Algy, you'd chuck it for his sake. And if you were really fond of your husband you'd chuck it for *his*. There's only one person you're fond of, Eleanor." She turned to Algy, flaming. He flinched as from some stinging beast. "You'll find that out for yourself before long," she cried. "You miserable, misled little pipsqueak."

Eleanor stood looking past Diana's head, tight-lipped. She slowly turned and said something in a quiet conversational tone to Algy about starting the car up. Soon, and without another word, they went.

CHAPTER VIII

CATS AND DOGS

THEY retrieved Algy's suitcase from the Ring o' Bells and were soon splashing along the main road eastward. All the morning it rained without cessation. Occasionally, with the almost incredible onslaught of the thunder-shower, it poured. Algy thought they'd better stop and shelter, but Eleanor turned this down. "Not until luncheon, anyhow. I want to get back to London," she said, "back to town." Her eyes were bright, for her own reflections. Algy, steering in mild obedience through water-holes, glanced at her now and then, as though slightly in doubt as to what sort of mood she was really in. She was rather silent and looked ahead through the rain—beyond the rain. Alas, dear Diana; the surest way of driving certain of your fellow-women into transgression is to accuse them of it in advance.

"This is poor going," said Algy. "You ought to have seen how she ran yesterday. Why wouldn't you be driven down yesterday? I can't make that out."

"Well, you never asked me. And I didn't think of it."

"What? But what about my note? In the bag?"

"What note, in what bag?"

"My note in your handbag at Twiggs'. You know. You left it on the waiting-room table. I put a note in it."

"You put a note in that vanity bag?"

"Yes. Saying I'd motor you down. Don't say you didn't see it?"

"It was Louise's bag, you priceless chump," said Eleanor.

Algy skidded.

"What did you say in the note?" added Eleanor.

"I don't know. Nothing much. Louise never said anything about it?"

"No. Perhaps she didn't know it was meant for me."

"She couldn't have thought it was meant for her," said Algy. "If she had, she'd have bought a pair of motor goggles and come to my flat yesterday. Besides, I addressed the note pointedly to you."

"But there was nothing suspicious in your asking me to be motored down. As I told you before, Louise didn't know that Reggy had deep-ended about you."

"Louise would suspect a curate left alone in a cathedral with a pew-opener," said Algy. "I bet you she's up to some dirty work about it."

Eleanor jerked back in her seat with a sudden cry of exasperation. "Oh, all these people! I don't care a hang. Let's get back to town."

"Louise has probably sent the note to Reggy," said Algy.

"I expect so. I don't care."

She gazed straight before her at the drenched and untransparent wind-screen.

"Reggy—Louise—Diana," she said. "They're asking for it, these people."

"My aunt, too," said Algy. "I'm disappointed in Auntie. Still, she, of course, judges only by her own experience which one knows to have been mottled in

the extreme. It's so silly really, because it would be quite easy to prove all these people wrong, if one could be bothered. You've been with one or another of them all the time. You were five nights with Louise and one with Diana."

"Yes," said Eleanor, slowly. "But it's to-night they'll want to know about. I think we'll get them guessing rather about to-night, shall we?"

At South Ditherton Mrs. Easy, having despatched her telegram to Mr. Hole, secured a lift in a cart conveying milk cans. This took the high road and put her down at a point from which she could gain her cottage by doing some wading through fields. Had the milk-can cart proceeded along the Chool Road Mrs. Easy might have been rather baffled. She would have met first the little car, containing the double-bedding roué, a completely strange woman and a portmanteau, and at a later stage Diana on foot; all hurrying through the rain from the cottage of profligacy. It was well for little Easy that his mother undertook her détour, for she arrived home very wet but so grimly satisfied with her morning's endeavour and so pleasantly preoccupied with anticipations of further research work during the afternoon, that little Easy enjoyed quite an unusually harmonious dinner-time.

It was a quarter past twelve when Diana once more found herself in the lake which, on a dry day, was the market square. She had left the cottage hard in the wake of the two-seater and covered four miles to the post office without a halt. Her shoes and stockings were wringing wet. She was still angry and miserable

and weary with that irksome weariness which follows a long walk in the rain on a hot day.

Her feelings were not soothed by the attitude of Miss Frisby, who presided over the post office. The moment Diana entered Miss Frisby ceased to count insurance stamps for an old lady, and glared at Diana rather as a bishop might (in company) inspect an indecent photograph. Miss Frisby was a tousled virgin of some thirty-five wet summers. She provided lively support for the theory that the Postmaster-General employs a touring press gang for the purpose of discovering all the most forbidding young females and installing them behind the cages of post offices.

Diana returned the silent challenge and went to the telegraph desk. The telegraph desk proved that Miss Frisby, however displeasing in aspect, was at least thorough in her post-official superintendence. The metal pencil case attached by a heavy chain to the telegraph desk had a pencil in it. Right in it. The pencil indeed had been so much appreciated and used that it had been worn right down until it was embedded in the pencil case with its point on a dead level with the top of the metal. This was all thanks to Miss Frisby. Most of the metal cases chained to telegraph desks have no pencils in them at all.

The pencil was just another little annoyance. Everything this morning was hostile to Diana. Eleanor—her smart, supercilious selfishness; quite apart from what she was up to. Algy, the grinning, misled fool. The weather—the clammy fatigue of the long walk in the heat; the sloppy misery of the long walk in the wet. The staring, unspoken challenge of the post-office

woman. Right down to the little irritating obstruction of the post-office pencil—everything hostile. A miserable day.

Diana battled with the pencil rather than put her uncertain patience to the test of words with Miss Frisby. Her telegram was brief and to the point. "They have both returned London to-day together in car. Diana." Miss Frisby could not disguise her disappointment at so meatless a meal.

For, less than two hours before, Miss Frisby had transmitted something much juicier concerning the young occupant of April Cottage. Quite a long time after Mrs. Easy had handed it in and stamped it with an eye-flicker of self-important reserve for Miss Frisby, the latter lady had remained pondering the telegram's contents and tapping her front teeth with a pen-holder. Finally, staunch in her duties, she had carried it to an inner chamber and commanded some unseen agent within to consign it to the wires.

Diana, from the post office, went to Pawley's. She would take Pawley's motor back to the cottage, change her clothes, and get some food. Depressing enough in any case seemed the prospect of April Cottage out there, damp and deserted, for many more days yet. Another long foot-slog out to it in squelching shoes—no. Pawley.

Pawley's yard contained Pawley's motor, looking not unlike one of those nauseating coloured charts of the human entrails. It also contained young Pawley, who was sitting with one of the removed entrails across his knee and hitting it with a hammer.

"Is the car out of order?" gasped Diana.

"Ay," replied young Pawley. "That she be and o' that thorough."

Diana went to the South Ditherton Drapery Mart and bought a pair of stockings. These she carried to the Ring o' Bells, where she assumed them and ordered lunch.

Algy and Eleanor lunched at Bristol. Rather than deviate from their course into the centre of the city, they stopped at a minor hostelry near the Great Western station. Inside the Great Western station on the down platform waited one Herbert Harrowing Pitts. Before they had finished their lunch and continued their run from South Ditherton to London, he had achieved his connection and was continuing his run from London to South Ditherton.

Henry was nearly there. His train was due at South Ditherton at 1.50, and about time too. He had left London in the morning sunshine and had brought neither coat nor umbrella. Apart from the prospect of getting obviously soaked to the skin and of having to sit in that condition for at least four and a half hours in some undetermined return train, he was really not at all certain of what lay before him. Somehow he must find this April Cottage and warn Eleanor and this fool boy that Reggy was on his way home. They might thank him; they might flout him. But he would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that he had done his best in the family cause.

Henry had not yet lunched. Alone of our protagonists he had not yet lunched; and 'twere well to catch a glimpse of each ere we plunge into the imbroglio of this Thursday afternoon. At Bristol then, as we know, with a dangerous light in her eyes, the siren Eleanor. Handing her familiarly the mustard and chatting to her undesignedly enough, but not unaware nor heedless of that gleam of unrevealed caprice, the squire Algy.

In their respective trains, the shadowy agent, Pitts; and, fore-ordained victim-in-chief of the whole affair, well-intentioned to get most deeply involved in its meshes, unprotected to get wettest in its rain, the fortuitous Henry. At South Ditherton, Diana; her normal sunny nature rapidly dispersing the clouds of distress under the influence of the Ring o' Bells cold pork and stone ginger. At Chool, her every munch a silent anticipatory threat, Mrs. Easy.

Willy, scenting upheaval, had gone out early and had dug himself well in for the day at his club, where now he chewed a tough and apprehensive cutlet. Louise, at home, pecked at something cold, did table devotions, took a tablet, popped in and out of the rooms, glancing at clocks, drumming on window-panes, behaving like a lively bullfinch in a cage. Her tendency to "quick breath" was particularly marked this day. She got a telegram from Reggy in the course of the afternoon, and hopped about more than ever.

Mrs. Krabbe got a telegram, too. Denise brought it to the bedroom with the luncheon. She rubbed her eye-glass along it and drew her Roman nostrils up into a great sniff. Then threw the telegram in a ball to the floor and turned inquiringly to her meal. "All right; leave the telegram where it is. What in the world have I got hold of here? Trotters or something?"

The luncheon of Captain Dumfoil in the Carlton Grill, though attended by an experienced chorus lady (the term "dashing" as applied to Guardees being associated almost entirely nowadays with this line of business), was a dull and rather morose proceeding unenlivened by telegraphy. But Lemon got a telegram with his. The hall-porter from Algy's block of flats

brought it along, thinking it might be urgent. Lemon, whose wife's mother had been sent for in a hurry, and was in a rather overwrought state all round, received it with a groan. It announced his young master's immediate return to London. "Oh, well," said Lemon, "I don't object. Anything to distract the mind."

And away up at Harrogate, plodding in from his morning exercise, with the rain dripping from features plum-coloured in exertion, bent, blowing, scowling horribly, falling foul of a bellboy, came old Mr. Hole to *his* telegram.

Hole Belvedere Htl H'gate
Cottage all upside down now young man joined her double bed got in yours out also wine bought disgraceful behaviour undoubted easy

Mr. Hole turned in the hotel bureau and brought down his walking stick with a thud of annoyance on the foot of an elderly gout patient at his side.

"My bill," he cried. "My bill. Understand? My —my—bill—bill. My bill. This comes of having women in these places. You tell them a thing five times and then they only look at you. What? Going? Yes, of course, I'm going. You! A train-bill. You hear? A train-bill. A train—train—bill—bill. A train-bill. Oh-h-h-h-h-h!"

There remains but one of our principals—the last but by no means the least. His progress on this fateful Thursday may be traced to a somewhat later stage in the proceedings, until, as the evening draws on, we shall call for him again, nor find him laggard.

He, too, may first be observed in the bureau of an hotel, proposing settlement and furious excursion.

This earlier in the forenoon. And in this case notice of departure had already been given. Even as Reginald in heated haste entered the bureau, the clerk dived for a pigeon-hole.

"Now then," said Reginald, "erm—*l'addition, s'il vous plait. Mon addition pour la visite totale.*"

"You beell for the 'ole tahm," said the clerk. "All right, sir. I 'ave it ready for you."

"Oh," said Reginald, in a somewhat resentful tone. "Oh—then—*vite.*"

"Here you are, sir. You return to England?"

"What business is that——? Oh, I see—yes. *Pour les lettres. Pour advancer. Oui. Vous avez mon address dans votre livre des visiteurs. Voici votre argent. Donnez le receipt.*"

"Certainly, sir. You wish for a taxi?"

"I know perfectly well what I wish for, thank you. I wish for my receipt. And if I wish to go and see any clowns, I can find my own way."

Very forebodingly and with a brow deeply furrowed in anger he was borne to the coast; glaring through the windows of his railway carriage with gloomy contempt for the sunny land, some of whose inhabitants he might this very day have skinned and bought out and cleaned up but for this untimely contingency at home.

This, our luncheon hour, he spent still in the Paris–Calais boat-train. He was *à déjeuner* in the—ah—*wagon de diner.* A Frenchman opposite to him consumed celery by the method of placing the end of a stalk in his fist on the table and working down to it with his mouth. Reginald would have protested, but the Frenchman had no English, and Reginald could not at

the moment recall the French word for "of, or belonging to, the jungle."

At Calais that crotchety old gentleman Neptune responded to Reginald's mood by preparing a heavy ground-swell. A solicitous steward predicted "a bit of a roll" and advised Reginald to arm himself in advance with a pillow. The solicitous steward was told that he would be sent for as and when required, and that meanwhile he needn't trouble himself to be cocky.

If Reginald boarded the boat in an ill-temper, the experiences of the brief voyage did not serve to appease it. The boat, for some preposterous reason, waited for an abnormal and overdue train, which, when it arrived, flooded the already well-patronized vessel with a gang of touring outsiders. Reginald was literally hemmed in, in his carefully selected chair on deck. On his left sat one of those females to whom the mere sight of a line of boats drawn up on a dry beach brings a faint qualm of nausea. On his right sat an elderly voyager with a gray beard and an ulster, who started very confidently and conversationally, but finished up a good second to the faint heart on the left, and who, handicapped as he was by beard and ulster, became particularly untidy and disagreeable.

Reginald landed at Dover, beneath a leaden sky, unimpaired physically but full of fury. He vented his spleen upon a customs man and gained the railway platform, only to be informed that the first train due out was already full, and that he had better hurry if he wanted a seat in the second. This the reward for his dignity in refusing to compete with a vulgar crowd of elbowing Goths on the landing stage. He secured an

inferior seat in the second train, in a carriage containing five obnoxious and inflamingly festive men.

It boded ill for any one who should obstruct him at the other end of his journey. Before the second train left (the first was scandalously dilatory) he sent a wire warning Louise of his impending descent upon the capital.

Was that rain he heard upon the station roof? Oh, yes, sir, the guard informed him. It had started to rain pretty hard, and looked likely to continue. A good job, too. The crops needed it. Reginald seemed to take this as a serious personal affront. "Do they; indeed! Well, I don't happen to be a crop."

But the guard was right and the rain did continue. Throughout the journey to London it thrashed the carriage windows in a vehement crescendo. And when at last—impatient beyond expression at the tardiness of his traffic and the undesirability of his fellow-travellers; chafing, almost beyond the ability to sit still, at the upheaval of his business affairs no less than at the unspeakable cause of that upheaval; fatigued in limb but in will relentless; sickened in stomach but in visage unsparing—when at five o'clock P. M. at last he shook his forefinger at a taxi man and threaded his way through the congestion of Victoria into the streets, the heavens were still pouring down upon him their tears—vain tears—for the frailties of woman; while above them grumbled intermittently the appropriate voices of the male gods, in an ominous mutter of resentment.

PART II

NOON OF MISCHIEF

CHAPTER IX

HE DALLIES AT DITHERTON

FLOURISHING stolidly among the temples of Nonconformity in the market square, the Ring o' Bells worthily upheld traditions as well-recognized and certainly as popular as any of theirs. It was not an inn; it was a hotel. The distinction was the same as that which makes a sunny, spectacled, and big-lapped dame with gray hair, whatever her class, not an old woman but an old lady.

A cobbled courtyard fronted the hotel, with the sign-board in its midst. Beneath the windows on either side of the porch were those seats in which we have discovered Mr. Moody and Mr. Jewell over their ale and gossip, on the afternoon of Wednesday, when Pawley's motor spent her last breath. The windows themselves appertained respectively to dining room and taproom, as might be gleaned from a very close inspection of the faded white inscriptions beneath the black wire blinds. The dining-room inscription was diffuse and catholic in its range of appeal. You could evidently obtain wines from the wood and (philosophical sequence) good stabling to follow, while that special accommodation which is always apparently demanded by cyclists was not forgotten. The taproom window held its own with the one bold, comprehensive, monosyllabic exhortation—"Beer."

It might be thought that Henry Bingham, that hesi-

tant man, would have paused to make inquiries at South Ditherton station. Not he. He thrust his ticket into the velveteen waistcoat of a porter and struck forth into the rain instinctively. He had scarcely had time to get wet before he was in the dining room of the Ring o' Bells.

The room was unoccupied. The relics of somebody's luncheon remained on the long centre table, but the consumer of the luncheon had departed. Henry looked in vain for a bell, so rapped with his fellow-patron's knife on the table and waited.

The dining room was not rich in the fulfilment of those promises held out to the favoured cyclists or even to the mere itinerant wayfarer. Its furniture was limited to some very thickset wooden chairs and a fireside bench, whose seat was so copiously studded with brass-headed nails that it resembled some mild form of mediæval torture. Above it hung a photograph, which appeared at first sight to constitute an awful warning in the form of a group of victims who had incurred the penalty of the bench, but which, on careful inspection, turned out to be a portrait of the South Ditherton and District Cricket Team of 1899.

After considerable knife-rapping Henry walked to the dining-room doorway and called: "Hi! I say." At which, from the mysteries of a kitchen passage came a woman with a dish-cloth.

"Oh!" said Henry. "Hallo! Good morning, or afternoon, or whatever it is. Look here. Can I——?"

"Muriel!" exclaimed the woman with the dish-cloth, completely and instantaneously disappearing.

Henry returned to the dining room where his patience was rewarded by the appearance of an apple-cheeked

damsel with hefty red forearms and a smile like a searchlight, as broad-beamed and buxom a wench as only the West Country can produce.

"Did you want summat to eat, sir?" she inquired.

"I did," said Henry. "I don't mind much what it is, but I want whatever it is badly."

"Ther's some coold porrk," said Muriel. Henry rubbed his hands together.

"Oh, rather," he said. "Cold pork and beer. That's the stuff to give the Turks. When will it be ready?"

"It's ready now, sir," said Muriel, and exit.

Ten minutes later, to the squeaking of boots which might have been the dying protest of the pork, it came. Henry was by this time past his patience, but the sight of Muriel and the pork in combination was so elevating that he stifled his remonstrance. He attacked the pork, while Muriel stood by the window, held, apparently, by an irresistible delight in watching him deal with crackling. Beer, in a blue china mug, romantically enhanced the rural atmosphere of the pleasant meal.

"Now," said Henry, having taken the edge off his appetite, "can you tell me the way to April Cottage?"

This had rather a startling effect on Muriel. Her whole countenance seemed to open like a box.

"Why," she said, "but the young leddy from April Cottage has jest gorrn."

Gorrn! Ah, this was the sister. But why gorrn? In what spirit gorrn! Gorrn in hostility, indignant at finding herself being cuckoldized without option into the illicit affairs of her brother? Gorrn amicably and by pre-arrangement, so as to leave them free for their naughty date at the cottage? Gorrn, anyhow, the sister; which meant that they were alone there together

and that he must hurry to them with his warning. His chief motive was to warn; but at the same time he would do well to arrive in time to anticipate any regrettable action on their part. After all, there they were in a sequestered cottage; and one must find something to do on a wet afternoon like this.

"So she has gone, has she?" he said. "I'm not surprised. I hardly expected to be in time to see her. But—do you happen to know anything of anybody else at the cottage at the moment?"

"Why," said the ready girl, "there was a young gent stayed here last night and went ther' this mornin'."

"Ah! He stayed *here* last night? And only went to the cottage this morning? Right. That's just as well."

"Well, sir," said Muriel, "he went ther' this mornin' and then coom back here and get his bag."

"Aha," said Henry. "Aha! I see. He came here, slept here, went out to the cottage this morning, had a look-see, and back he comes for his bag. Aha! And then?"

"He had a moterr. And when he coom back ther' was a leddy in it with him. A strange leddy."

Yes, yes. This all tallied. The sister gorrn. The brother goes out to the cottage, finds his Eleanor, and they come joy-riding back to the hotel to get his bag and return to the cottage together. Yes, yes.

"Yes, yes," said Henry. "And when the young gentleman had got his bag, off he went again in the motor to the cottage with the strange lady? Yes?"

"That might be," said Muriel. "They went in that direction. But they'll be harrd put to it if they be to stay ther'."

"They will," said Henry. "But why do you say so?"

"I've heard tell ther' be oonly one bedroom in that cottage," said Muriel.

"Yes, so have I," said Henry. "Still, I don't suppose that's altogether escaped their notice. Besides, in any case, I shouldn't think they'll be going to bed just yet, should you?"

"Maybe the young gent intends to coom back here again for to-night," said Muriel.

"No. I think I can safely say he doesn't intend to do that," replied Henry, sagely. "Tell me, how long ago was it when he and this strange lady went back together to the cottage in the car?"

"Oh, soom hours ago now," said Muriel.

"M'yes," said Henry. He deliberated for a moment, stroking his moustache; then abruptly rose.

"I should like some cheese," he said, "and I should love some more beer; but I don't think I'd better hang about too long."

"I'll get your bill, sir," said Muriel.

"Oh, well, if you're going to wait and get bills, perhaps I've just got time for—— Bring me my bill in the bar, will you?"

Mr. Plum, the landlord of the Ring o' Bells, was himself presiding over the taproom, a short, rosy, conversational man with no collar. The inveterate Messrs. Moody and Jewell were in attendance.

"A beer, please," said Henry. "And can you tell me how far it is to April Cottage?"

"April Cottage?" repeated Mr. Plum. "Ther' aren't no April Cottage in Dither'n."

"'Oole's," exclaimed Mr. Jewell.

"Ay, 'Oole's," echoed Mr. Moody.

"Oo! Ah! 'Oole's?" said Mr. Plum. "'Oole's cottage?"

"What? April Cottage is the name," said Henry.

"Ah! But belonging to Mr. 'Oole," said Mr. Jewell.

"'Oole," echoed Mr. Moody.

"That's right," said Mr. Plum. "'Oole be the name of the owner."

"Oh," said Henry. "I don't know. I daresay. But Mr. Oole is not there now. At least, I hope not."

"Noo," said Mr. Jewell. "'E aren't ther'."

"Noo," said Mr. Moody. "Not 'ee."

"You see, sir?" said Mr. Plum. "'E aren't ther'."

"No, I *know* he's not," said Henry. "We're all quite agreed about—oh, my beer; thanks. We're all quite agreed about Mr. Oole. He's not there. But his cottage is there, isn't it?"

"Ay," said Mr. Plum.

"Yes. Well, where is it?"

Mr. Plum raised his eyebrows and glanced at his associates as though requesting their indulgence for this poor soul.

"Wher' is it? Why, wher' you jest said, sir," he replied. "You say, 'The cottage be still ther'. Wher' is it?' Why, wher' you said."

"Yes, but——"

"Ah, don't you see, Burrt," said Mr. Jewell. "The ge'm'n don't know wher' he be."

"Noo, that be right," agreed Mr. Moody. "That's wher' his trouble lie. 'E don't know wher' he be."

"Yes, I do, thank you," said Henry. "I know where I am all right. But I don't know where the cottage is."

"Ah, that's jest what I say, mister," said Mr. Jewell. "You don't know wher' he be."

"Who?"

"Why, the cottage to be sure," said Mr. Jewell.

"Ah-h-h!" said Mr. Moody. "That be the trouble. You don't know wher' he be."

Henry took a brief fortifier of beer and turned again to Mr. Plum.

"How far and where is April Cottage?" he asked.

"Ah!" said Mr. Plum. "Wull, do you know Chool?"

"Chool? Who's he? You mean Oole? Please don't start about Oole again. What I want——"

"No, not 'Oole—Chool," said Mr. Plum.

"Chool," said Mr. Jewell.

"Chool," said Mr. Moody.

"Chool," said Mr. Plum.

"Chool, mister," said Mr. Jewell.

"Ah!" said Mr. Moody, with the composing finality of one speaking the tag of a Victorian farce. "Chool."

Henry had some more beer.

"Yer see what it is," said Mr. Moody, in a confidential aside, "it ain't no good fer to tell 'im Chool; because 'e don't know wher' he be."

Mr. Jewell scratched his head.

"If 'e don't know wher' Chool be, how be he going for to find out wher' the cottage be?" he asked.

"Well, damn it, he isn't at this rate," said Henry. "I may tell you I'm in a very great hurry to get to this cottage. I only allowed myself the time to come and have this glass of beer because I was waiting for my bill for lunch. Unless I can get to April Cottage quite soon something rather serious may happen."

Unfortunately, Mr. Jewell interpreted this as a

threat. He had already gazed at Henry very menacingly for several seconds, and placed his beer mug on the floor beside him, when Muriel entered with the bill.

"Ah!" said Henry. "Good girl. How far is this place, and how do I get there?"

"Main road east, first to the left and first to the left again, sir. About four miles," said Muriel.

Henry turned, quite indignantly for him, on the taproom sages.

"There, you see! I ask her, and she tells me almost quicker than I can take it in. And you, with all your Ooling and Chooling——!" He again looked at Muriel, and briefly pondered. "Four miles, though, by Jove! I must buck up. Where can I hire a car?"

"Pawley's——" began Muriel, from force of habit, only to be drowned by a chorus of revengeful ridicule.

"Pawley's mowerr—noo—burrst. Ay, burrst—— Noo, burrst yesterday—— Noo, burrst she wer'—— Ay, and thorough. Ther'll be no 'iring no Pawley's mowerr not to-day ther' will. Ay, that ther' won't—— Ay—— Noo—— Burrrrst!"

Henry turned again to Muriel.

"The car you mentioned appears to have exploded," he said. "Where can I hire another? Quick, now."

"Ther' aren't another," said Mr. Plum.

"You mean to tell me that in a place this size there is only one car?"

"Ay," said Mr. Plum.

"Ay," said Mr. Moody.

"And she's burrst," said Mr. Jewell.

"Ay," agreed Mr. Moody, "and she's burrst."

Henry finished his beer quickly. "Come with me," he said to Muriel.

"Oh, sir—where?" said Muriel. "To April Cottage?"

"No, girl, no. Don't you start being silly now. I want you in the passage. I can't stick this."

"'Old on, sir, 'old on," said Mr. Plum. "Ther' be more ways left of getting around Dither'n, if so be you want to get around. Ther' be Pillbutton's 'ackney."

"Ah," said Mr. Moody. "The 'ackney."

"You can 'ire a bi-cycle from Mrs. Leake," said Mr. Jewell.

"I'm not going to ride a bicycle for four miles through this rain," said Henry. "What about this hackney?"

"Pillbutton be the proprietor of he," said Mr. Plum.

"Pillb——" began Mr. Moody.

"All right, thank you," said Henry. "Where is Pillbutton?"

"Three yarrds down the road, he be," said Mr. Plum.

"Three yards?" repeated Henry, incredulously.

"Ay," said Mr. Plum, "three yarrds."

"Three yarrds," said Mr. Moody.

"Three yarrds," said Mr. Jewell.

"The third yard you come to on your left, sir," said Muriel.

"Oh! I see. Yes, thanks. Good girl. Come into the passage. How much is the beer?"

"Now," said Henry, as he gained the porch of the hotel, accompanied by Muriel. "The third yard on the left. Is Mr. Pillbutton anything like those other gentlemen? If so, you'd better come, too. Never mind. I expect I can manage. Only it's awfully wet. I suppose you haven't got such a thing as an umbrella?"

"No, sir," said Muriel. "But I might be able to borrow one for you, if you care to wait."

"I simply can't wait any longer. I've probably waited too long as it is. I'll go without. Thank you; you're a very good girl. Here, that's for yourself. Now—this yard? The third on the right?"

"Left, sir."

"Left? Right. And April Cottage? First to the right and first to the right again?"

"Left, sir."

"Left? Right. Good girl. Good-bye."

Already sadly perplexed by the entanglements of the taproom, disagreeably surprised by the distance to April Cottage, subconsciously funky of the reception which awaited him when he did get there, yet regardful of the need for haste, he plunged forth into the rain, which was at this moment falling with hellish intensity. By the time he reached Pillbutton's yard he was very wet. In Pillbutton's yard was an overgrown boy with a squint, sitting beneath the leaking roof of an open shed on an upturned box and scratching the ear of a collie dog with a straw; and in a stable opposite an old, bald man cleaning the metal on some harness with saliva.

"Ah!" cried Henry, hurrying into the shelter of the stable. "Here we are. Are you Mr.—what is it? Button-hook or something—Pillbutton, that's it. Are you Mr. Pillbutton?"

"Me, sur?" replied the old man. "Noo—nay—noo—nay—noo—nay. Nay. Me? Noo."

"Well, I don't care a damn," said Henry, who was wearing his summer pants and could already feel the damp through the knees of his trousers; who had not yet begun to attack the four miles to April Cottage; who had, in fact, travelled a considerable distance in the opposite direction in order to find Pillbutton's yard and

was, in consequence, later than ever in getting off the mark; who was determined to stand no further procrastination from these blasted natives. "If you're not Mr. Pillbutton, you must be connected with his establishment. Otherwise you wouldn't be standing there spitting on his saddles. Come on, now. Buck up. I want to go to April Cottage in the hackney."

The old man laid aside the saddle and started massaging himself instead. He then walked to the door of the stable and stood regard ng the overgrown boy doubtfully.

"It might so be that I could get him to harness the punch," he said at length.

"The punch?"

"Ah. The oonly horse in the stable at this here present moment be the punch. It might so be I could get him to harness the punch. He drive the punch, he do."

"Oh, does he? That's all right. I'll tell him to harness the punch at once."

"Steady, mister," said the old man, laying a hand on Henry's arm. "You have to be careful with he, if you want for to get him to do anything."

"Why?" demanded Henry.

"Because he's half sharp," said the old man. "You leave him to I."

He crossed the yard to where the boy was sitting. Henry, groaning aloud with impatience, followed and took shelter beneath the eaves of the leaking roof.

"Pete," began the old man, very deliberately. "If I was to say to you as how it would be impossible for to harness the punch to the hackney and take 'un out on the road, you'd 'ave to say as how I was right."

"Garn," said the boy, looking up defiantly. "Easy."

The old man shook his head.

"Not in this 'ere rain," he said. "The punch wouldn't goo."

"Garn," said the boy. "He would easy."

"Also, moreover," said the old man, "the 'ackney would get so spockled up in the rain and mud and all, you'd never be able to cleanse her free."

"Yah," said the boy. "I've unspockled 'er o' wurrse."

"Oh, I say, really, confound this——" began Henry, but the old man turned upon him with violent gesticulations.

"Go easy, sur," he said. "It be coming on foine." He drew a step nearer Henry and proceeded very confidentially to explain.

"You see, sur," he said, "this be the only method o' getting Pete to do ought. You got to so to speak challenge 'im; to as it wer' make out to 'im that 'e can't do what you want 'im to, so as to get 'im to do 'un. That be the oonly way with 'im, be reason of his being half sharp."

"Good heavens!" cried Henry. "And when you get to the place you're aiming at, I suppose you've got to bet him a bob he can't stop the punch? No damn fear! I'll walk."

At this moment a choked waste-pipe in the eaves overflowed in a waterspout, full on to Henry's Trilby hat.

"Oh, curse this place!" he cried, springing too late to one side. "Why was I ever such a misguided fool as to—I don't care. I'll go through with it. Pete! You can no more get that punch out of that stable

and put it in the hackney and drive me to April Cottage than I can jump from here to the moon."

Pete was on his feet in two seconds and across to hitherto uninspected stable buildings in five, the collie barking and curvetting at his side. Henry, attempting to dry his shoulders and knees with a handkerchief, watched his progress keenly. Pete entered the stables and reappeared, dragging a light governess cart.

"Great Scot!" exclaimed Henry. "Is that the hackney?"

"Ah," replied the old man. "That she be."

Henry surveyed the pitiless heavens.

"I shall have to be diplomatic with this Algy," he soliloquized. "You can't walk into a house and tick a man off and then borrow a pair of his bags."

CHAPTER X

AND LOOKS LIKE DALLYING AT CHOOL

PLODDING, plodding along a Chool Road which was a seething pond (she began by trying to pick her way, but there was soon no way to pick); gaining, at the end of it, a zigzag decline down which the water was running in rivulets as from a spring; her rainproof coat proved underproof; her dear little Donegal tweed hat a sponge; but with her anger mollified now into the helpless amusement of philosophical affliction, Diana at last reached April Cottage.

It was now a quarter to three. She had taken well over the normal hour to walk from South Ditherton.

She wrung the Donegal hat out in the porch. Her shoes made water-squeezing noises in the passage. She entered the parlour and removed her rainproof, testing various portions of herself underneath. Not so bad. The exteriors could do with attention. She would change her coat and skirt and her new stockings. Ran upstairs and did. Brought the wet things down again to the kitchen to dry them before the fire.

The kitchen fire was out.

Suddenly, almost as a blow, and for the first time since she had been an exile, Diana felt the whole burden of her loneliness. Somehow the fatigue of having to rebuild and rekindle that fire would have been far less a fatigue with someone to stand by and watch her doing

it. But why? Last night she had had someone standing by. Had that been much solace? Then as she stood, clasping her wet raiment, her morning's anger turned to something near despair, she realized the cause of the depression.

Beat, beat, beat, the rain on the roof. Swish, swish, the rain running down the pipes into the lushed gutters. Ssssss—in the trees above the cottage. That was it. That unceasing, inexorable visitation of the skies. She had never known till then that, more than in darkness, more than in suffering, more even perhaps than in death, one must have company in rain.

("Half a tick! Let's see—first to the left, yes. Pete! You can't turn to the left to save your life.")

Well, well. If company was hard to find on ordinary days it was out of the question this afternoon. She must make the best of things. She had laid aside her wet things and was at the kitchen fireplace with a brush, when she remembered something. To be sure. In the parlour was a fire all ready laid, needing only a match. Besides, a fire in the parlour would be pleasant to-day.

So she lit the fire in the parlour.

The punch was practically amphibious. It revelled in Chool Road. Great spurts of water came kicking up into the hackney. Attacked by the elements from above and below, Henry remained in a state of sodden bewilderment, on a seat of which the only dry spot was that occupied by the only dry spot on his clothing. He could no longer complain, however, that his time was being wasted. Pete, even if half sharp, was no mean Jehu.

The punch appreciated Pete a good deal more than

did the majority of the latter's acquaintances. It entered fully into the Pete method. When Pete said "Whoa!" the punch leapt forward as though stung. To stop the punch all standing, almost within its own length, Pete said "Hup!" He had not said this yet with Henry.

The corner of the zigzag was obscured by trees, and though Henry was watchful, he was so blinded by water and carried away by the speed of the punch that the hackney had passed this next objective before the passenger was able to shout. When he did shout he shouted: "Oh, hi! (First to the left again.) Stop! That is—er—I bet you can't stop."

"Hup!" said Pete, and the punch skated and came to rest.

"Now—one moment—yes. You can't go down that road, you know," said Henry. "The punch simply couldn't do it. It's too steep."

"Right ahead," said Pete to the punch, who obediently turned.

But at the sight of the zigzag and of the perilous decline of the zigzag and the rivulets, Henry's eyes widened. He had rashly incited Pete. It *was* too steep. Henry clutched the rail of the hackney and attempted to adjust his mind quickly, so as to be able to challenge Pete out of this desperate essay. In his nervous excitement he went to the lengths of betting Pete half-a-crown that he couldn't turn the punch on so difficult a level and stop again at the top corner. Whereupon Pete laughed aloud at such incredulity in the powers of the punch, and told the punch once more to go right ahead and hup; and Henry climbed, thanking God, from the hackney, richly rewarded Pete

and set off on foot down the zigzag. After all, April Cottage couldn't be far away. He must have been pretty nearly Muriel's four miles already.

And Pete drove back to Pillbutton's yard and unharnessed the punch and pushed in the hackney and tethered the punch and fed the punch. And presently, the punch being a very little punch, Pete sat down in his favourite spot in the stable, with his head resting against the punch's belly, and went to sleep. And after a little while the collie came in, too, and lay down beside him and licked his hand.

The sound in Diana's ears was no longer the sound of rain. That was drowned, or forgotten. She only heard a roar—an ominous, awe-inspiring, joyous roar like laughter. The most terrible laughter in the world. The laughter of fire.

Only in the chimney, but frightening enough. There was good food for the flame clotted all the way up the wall, and the flame seethed delightedly up and feasted.

Feasted, roaring; increasingly roaring. Great fragments of the meal half-devoured, great blazing masses of soot, came hurtling down into the grate. Smoke filled the parlour.

Diana ran out into the rain and looked up. A black cloud, poured forth from the chimney, was hanging in the still air, dissipating reluctantly and ever massing in volume. While she watched, flame was in the cloud, and soon a fiery wisp of danger, flung up from the chimney, fell on to the slope of the tiled roof, expiring into powder in the rain. Another, bigger, more threatening wisp, burning on this time as it clung to the sloping roof for a few moments before sizzling out.

Diana was frankly frightened. Forgot she was lonely, but remembered she was alone. Forgot she wanted company, but knew she wanted help.

She ran back into the parlour. The roar had increased. Smoke was pouring through cracks in the brickwork of the fireplace right up to the ceiling. She put her hand to the bricks and had to withdraw it quickly.

Nothing dangerous really, she told herself. Only a chimney on fire. Still, frightening. She didn't like those burning masses of stuff blowing from the chimney. Not that there was any chance of the house catching fire, was there? It would burn itself out soon in the chimney. It roared louder than ever at this, and a blazing chunk of rubbish was thrown right out of the grate on to the worn carpet of the parlour. She beat it out with her wet coat. The mess the parlour was getting into! Not that that seemed to matter now. She raked at the fire with a poker and took fuming lumps of coal away in the tongs, filling the grate with risky, clotted, red-hot stuff that belched smoke into the parlour.

Suddenly she remembered—salt. That was the recognized household remedy for a fire in the chimney. It might be an old wives' tale, but there was no harm in trying. It so happened that among that parcel of groceries she had brought back from South Ditherton that morning had been a cylindrical tin of salt in far too great a quantity for her requirements. The young man at the shop had harangued her into accepting it while she had been preoccupied with thoughts of Eleanor. It was in the kitchen. She ran and found it.

When she got back to the parlour she found a piece

of cinder merrily burning a hole in the carpet. She flung salt on the fire and, shielding her face with her hand, stooped and tried the rather futile experiment of shooting salt from the tin up the chimney from below. The roar did not diminish. If only she could get on the roof and pour the salt down the chimney——

She hurried out into the rain again. Perhaps by getting on to the bank behind the cottage she could scramble on to the roof. She ran round behind and investigated. She might be able to do it. The cottage was scarcely a yard from the bank, which rose almost sheer. Then she noticed a small curl of smoke issuing from a cranny between two tiles in the roof, and for a moment her heart stood still. Was the cottage on fire?

She must have one more look at the parlour before she dared attempt her gymnastic feat from the bank. She once more skipped around the house (the back door was still locked) and glanced into the parlour. So far as she could see for smoke, the parlour was not on fire. Out again through the front porch—and full into the waistcoat of Henry.

She uttered a little cry, but quickly recovered herself. A man. Who? Never mind who. She thrust the tin of salt into his hand.

"Quick!" she said. "Scramble on to the roof from the bank at the back and pour salt down the chimney."

Henry had visited many strange dwelling-places, but was quite unable to recall any reception so staggering. He stood, saturated and foolish, blinking alternately at the tin and at Diana. She was in no mood for discussion. She caught his sleeve and pulled him round the cottage before he managed to utter a syllable.

"Come up here on this bank," she said. "Quick! You can soon see what's the matter."

She grasped a tree-trunk and pulled herself up on the bank. Henry attempted to follow, slithered and sat heavily at the foot of the bank.

"Oh, look, look!" cried Diana. "More smoke from more places! Do, do, please get up and come up here and look, and scramble up and pour salt."

"Righto," said Henry, rising. "It doesn't much matter what I do now. But why pour salt? As a matter of fact, I've just poured some into my eye."

"Never mind," said Diana. "There's plenty left in the tin. Here, take my hand and I'll help you up."

He complied, conscious even in so practical a moment of a brief, passing sense of felicity at the touch of her neat fingers.

"Now," she went on, hastily, "do you think you can get up on to the roof and sort of haul yourself up the tiles to the chimney? I'm sure you can. Perhaps if I stood here and sort of—pushed you from behind——"

"Yes," he said. "I think you might do that. But why, exactly, are we doing this?"

"Well, good heavens, can't you see the chimney's on fire? What do you suppose I'm doing? Bird-nesting? And trying to climb up and put the salt on the tails of the birds? Up you go, there's a—— Do, please, will you?"

"Oh, I see. Now I'm beginning to get the idea. But why salt?"

"It does it, it does it—it puts it out," cried Diana, gesticulating wildly. "Oh, do please scramble and try."

"*Does* it?" said Henry, with interest. "How very

queer of salt. I never knew that. I wonder why it is. Righto. I'll try."

He tried. By clinging to a hazardous rain pipe and lurching violently upwards with one knee, even a man stout and out of training might easily accomplish the feat. Henry, however, lurched tentatively once and returned to the bank.

"I think it would be easier if I didn't have the salt to carry," he said.

"I'm afraid there's no object in going without it," replied Diana, rather curtly. "The whole idea in going up there is to put the fire out with the salt."

"I might take off my coat and wring it down the chimney," said Henry. "It would probably flood the room underneath the chimney, but that is up to you to choose."

"Can you put the salt in your pocket?"

"I don't think so. My pocket is so wet, you see. By the time I took the salt out again it would probably be like a sort of bun. Which, I suppose, would not have the same effect on the fire. As a matter of fact, it's news to me that salt 'does it,' as you say, in any state."

"Oh, I say, really, something must be done quickly. It's still blazing. Look!"

"Yes. Righto. I suppose you couldn't hold the tin of salt and hurl it up to me when once I'm there?"

"The top's off the tin," said Diana. "Carry it in your mouth, holding the tin at the edge between your teeth. Can you do that?"

Henry tried. "I can," he said, "but it cuts the top of my nose most dreadfully and simply pours salt into

my nose and moustache. However, as you said, there's plenty. Righto. I'll try again."

With the tin in his mouth he gripped the water pipe and lurched with the knee. In this attitude he perilously hovered, turning to utter weird and salted incitements to Diana to push as arranged. At considerable risk she too leant her weight against the gallant water pipe and pushed. Eventually he half climbed, half rolled on to the sloping roof. Throughout the proceedings water continued to pour down unceasingly from above; fire and smoke to pour up unceasingly from below.

Henry's progress was not facile. The angle of the roof was steep and the tiles were very slippery with the rain. The tin by this time, and thanks in a great measure to his attempts at conversation, was cutting the bridge of his nose so infernally that he removed it and stuck it in the front of his coat. Cautiously on all fours he clambered onward to the chimney.

He stretched a hand upward to clasp the chimney. "Don't touch the bricks," shouted Diana; but she was too late. "Ar'ch!" he cried, and waggled his scorched fingers. Then slipped on the greasy tiles and staggered to recover his balance.

The tin fell from his coat and rolled down the slope, leaving a salt-water canal to mark its route. Henry clutched at it, missed it, overbalanced, took seat on the tiles and, with the whoop of an uncontrolled tobogganist, followed it.

Diana's hand went to her heart. For a brief second she closed her eyes; then jumped from her bank to where he lay. He had fallen on his feet, but his legs had

given way under him. He sat, almost blocking up the narrow space between the cottage and the bank, clasping his left foot. His face was screwed into an expression of extreme agony.

"May I swear?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"Rather," replied Diana. "I'm only so thankful you can."

He managed to rise with her help and, with his arm round her shoulders, to hop round April Cottage to the porch. The parlour was out of the question. Diana propped him on a kitchen chair. She went on her knees and took off his shoe and his sock. He sat back with closed eyes, groaning a word of thanks, his hands tightly clutching the arms of the wooden chair, while he drew in every breath between closed teeth in a faint whistle of pain.

"I—I'm sorry," he managed to say after a little while. "It's no good my trying to pretend it's nothing and—oo—that it'll—soon be all right, and—oo—that sort of thing, because it hurts too much to—be brave about."

"P'raps you've broken your ankle," said Diana. "Now, does that hurt? When I do that?"

He kept his mouth shut for ten seconds and then said gently:

"Don't run the risk of my being rude to you after you have been so very kind—hitherto—to me."

"I wonder if it would be any good if I bathed it in hot water," said Diana.

"It's very sweet of you to think of it," he replied. "I shouldn't think it would be the least good."

"Are you sure?" said Diana. "Because I can easily —— Oh, no, I can't."

She glanced at the cold kitchen grate, and sighed.

"I should have to make up another fire and light it," she added, "and then heat the water up. But I'll do it like a shot if you think it would help."

"For God's sake," said Henry, "—excuse my expressing myself rather firmly—but for God's sake, light no more fires in this place to-day. I am through with salting them."

"Well, there's only one thing to be done," said Diana. "I must go into South Ditherton and get the doctor. I'll put my room ready for you upstairs and you can lie on the bed till the doctor comes."

Henry sat cautiously upright and regarded her with interest, while still grimacing frequently from pain.

"Are you the sister?" he asked.

"I'm Diana Richardson Gascoyne."

"Oh. This is very strange. I thought you'd gorrn."

"What?"

"Muriel told me you'd gorrn."

"I don't understand. Who is Muriel? Who are you, if it comes to that?"

"Muriel is a girl in a pub at that place, Blither—what's-its-name. Oh, bl—excuse me—may I? Thanks. Oh, blast this agony!"

"Poor thing. I wish I could do more for you. Who are you?"

"I'm Henry Bingham. Eleanor's brother-in-law. I came down because I thought there was something—ar'ch—going on down here between her and your brother and I wanted to warn them. Where are they?"

"They've gone," said Diana, briefly, rising. "One half moment. I'll just see whether the house is on fire and then I'll——"

"Gorrn?" exclaimed Henry. "They've gorrn and you haven't gorrn? Muriel is almost as bad as those three gentlemen in the bar."

"What?"

"Never mind. I've been misinformed. You'd better trot along and see about the fire. We mustn't fiddle while Rome is burning. Then come back and we'll go deeper into this problem."

She went and returned immediately. The fire in the chimney was subsiding. He needn't really have gone on the roof at all. This was small consolation. She found him still grimacing and chair-gripping in his pain. His plump cheeks were quite pale.

"Wait there a little while longer," she said, with busy sympathy. "The first thing to do is to get that room upstairs straight and help you up there. It may be a tiny bit less agonizing when you lie down. We can tell each other all about Eleanor and Algy later on. They don't matter now."

"I can't lie on a bed," murmured Henry.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm wet through. Not merely wet, but through."

"Oh," pondered Diana. "Yes, that's going to be rather troublesome."

"It's been it for some time already," said Henry.

"I don't know quite what's to be done about that," said Diana. "I've no spare things except my own, and my uncle has locked up all his. Do you think you could put on a crêpe-de-Chine nightgown with your foot?"

"It doesn't sound very easy. But if I'm going to lie up on a bed I think I'd better try."

"You'll have to take your things off, in any case, if

you're going to sit or lie about here for long, or you'll catch pneumonia. It doesn't matter my being wet, because I'm going out again. Stay where you are for a minute or two, and I'll have the bed made and the room ready for you."

He looked up at her, nodded, and managed to smile his pleasant smile. For a moment his appreciation overcame the suffering which he was fighting to endure.

"Thank you immensely," he said, "you entirely charming person. If I'd known that this Algy had a sister like you I need never have troubled to come down here at all."

A spasm of pain overtook him and he winced, but recovered and regained his smile.

"But I would have," he added. "I would have."

Diana smiled back at him for a few eloquently silent seconds. Then with a little business-like jerk of the head, turned and plunged into her unexpected domestic business.

The parlour was like some spent Gehenna of soot and smoke. She closed the door upon it, with a laugh for the appalling prospect of cleaning it up. The whole cottage was filled with the fumes of the chimney blaze. What did that matter? A shrug for that. The rain which had so depressed her was still hammering remorselessly upon the roof. She only heard it now between her bustling labours of tucking the new sheets and blanket on to the double bed and of sweeping her own articles of clothing from here and there about the room into the chest of drawers; and heeded it not at all.

Henry, in the kitchen, found some material solace in his pipe, the stem of which received a pretty severe testing in his spasms. He found it difficult to think of

anything except the pain, but he was sick about Eleanor. If only he could have delivered his warning and driven the two delinquents back into a condition of artificial respectability for the reception of Reggy —if only he could have achieved this and *then* have found that he had to stay at this cottage with the sister —that would have been ideal. As it was, there seemed no hope of rescuing Eleanor now. Apart from that it might be worse. That is to say, the foot could not possibly be worse. But the sister might be lots worse —lots. He couldn't, in fact, remember ever having encountered anybody's sister who could be much better. This, in little pranks of thought between bouts of agony soul-twisting, unendurable.

Diana soon finished and was down in the kitchen again.

"Come on," she said. "I'll take you upstairs now. The bed's all ready."

He smiled and levered himself up on to his sound foot. He again placed his arm round Diana's shoulders and, with her assistance, he staggered to the staircase.

Meanwhile neither of them spoke another word, much to the disappointment of Mrs. Easy, who had just arrived outside the kitchen window, where in horrified but unflinching absorption she vainly waited for more.

The one sentence she had heard was, it must be admitted, a bit of an appetizer.

CHAPTER XI

THE THREEPENNY HERO

AT A quarter past three, the Ring o' Bells was given the chance to justify itself. A keen cyclist arrived.

He did not arrive cycling, nor sought he accommodation. But, when Muriel, her face opening like a box again, only more widely than ever, told him that the only possible way for any one to get out to April Cottage now, unless one walked, was to hire a cycle from Mrs. Leake and ride it through the rain, the visitor, without hesitation, agreed to do this. A keen cyclist, evidently.

Muriel, her tongue itching with rumour and question, took stock of this latest April Cottager, and restrained herself. She wasn't sure that she liked the look of him, and idle talk might only go and put difficulties in the way of the former stout gentleman, who had gone out to the cottage in Pillbutton's hackney. And, rather than offend the former stout gentleman, Muriel would die. For with him he had carried away, undreamt-of as the cup in the sack of Benjamin, a large portion of Muriel's heart.

Mr. Herbert Harrowing Pitts presented himself, therefore, at the cycle shop of Mrs. Leake, a queenly, bulbous figure, with a black satin dress which had swept the floor for well-nigh a generation. She supplied him with a rather angular machine, of the late Victorian

model, with racing handle-bars and metal grooves on the pedals for the reception of the toes.

Mr. Pitts was not, by nature, the sort of young man who rides a push-bicycle from Mrs. Leake's to April Cottage in a deluge without some pretty stern motive. Louise Piper supplied the motive for almost every disagreeable action which this unfortunate satellite performed. He did not love Mrs. Piper, though he sometimes thought he detected on her part a coy little flutter of half-naughtiness, as he handed her into a taxi or touched her inadvertently at a tea-table. But he enjoyed from Mrs. Piper a patronage so hearty, that he was often tempted to attribute it to some cause beyond the purely religious.

A year ago he had been in a drapery establishment, but, impressionably responding to the combined advances of Mrs. Piper and St. Philip's, he had (and very creditably) invested a modest inheritance in the prospect of holy orders. Meanwhile, Mrs. Piper called him "dear boy," and took him to *matinées*.

She did more than this. With little smiling hints, she corrected his occasional lapses in deportment, teaching him to acquire that ease of manner—that confidence, bordering on supreme indifference to everything and studied insolence to everybody—which the best people always regard as so estimable a characteristic of the high-church clergy.

Berty Pitts, schooled in that verbally punctilious line of commerce in which a waistcoat is a vest, and a vest is—"Vest, sir? Oh, you mean gent's singlets? Yes, certainly. Mr. Feeny! Singlets!" preserved, like a secret sin, a failing for nice attire. At the moment, he fortunately wore a mackintosh, or shower-

skin; but, by the time he had gained the Chool Road, the rain had penetrated his vest to his shirting, while both his singlet and summer panting were feeling the effects of unwonted exercise from within. His beaverine head-joy was, of course, sodden. His foot-felicity and half-hose had been wet before he started.

But he toiled on through the morass of muddy water. Even his precious raiment must be sacrificed at the dictates of Mrs. Piper.

He had got to please Mrs. Piper this day, in fashion most peculiar. At this cottage a couple were contemplating, if not yet actually performing, the act of mortal sin. Mrs. Piper had thus herself described their occupation, dropping her voice and blinking her distaste at having to mention such a subject to one who would, of course, embrace celibacy. But Berty's job was not in any way to interfere with the course of mortal sin. He was simply to spy, unobserved, round the cottage, discover who was there, take notes of anything he chanced to overhear, and report immediately by telephone from South Ditherton. If caught, he was to excuse himself by saying he was picnicking, and wanted some water. He recalled this instruction just as he entered the largest puddle in the Chool Road, and decided that it was lacking in subtlety.

Though intimidated by the hazards of the commission, he had, of course, given way without much demur. He had to. "For your sake, dear soul," he said, "it shall be done." (Louise herself had told him to call her "dear soul," but, slightly tainted by a Cockney accent, it didn't sound as beatific as she had hoped.)

So here he was, at it—in the puddles. He had had about enough of Mrs. Leake's bicycle by the time he

got to the corner. He dismounted, removed his beaverine, flung back his long forelock by a jerk of the head, and wheeled his bicycle cautiously down the zigzag.

Diana knocked at the bedroom door and listened. The response was an effortful groan, like an exaggerated sigh. She decided that her first duties were those of the nurse. The proprieties could take care of themselves. She therefore walked into the room, fully intending to undress him, and put him into his crêpe-de-Chine nightgown, if he were unable to complete this office for himself. Thank God, for so practical and sensible a young woman.

He proved, however, to be so far into his nightgown that he was already halfway out again. He had tried to button the neck, with the result that the button had burst, like a stone from a catapult, and lay upon the floor. Also, upon the floor lay his discarded clothes (cast aside haphazard in the strain of the disrobing operation) and one or two patches of damp from the same.

He was not thoroughly on the bed, but was propped in a very uncomfortable position, with his injured foot up and one hand levering against the seat of a chair at his side. The effort of undressing had evidently been very arduous. He was still biting into the stem of his now cold pipe. He made an apologetic effort to hold his nightgown together at the bosom with his disengaged hand. He was gray with anguish.

Diana was supporting him in a moment, grasping him tightly round the shoulders, and helping him into position for reasonable comfort. Her cheek brushed his, and the crêpe-de-Chine nightgown could not have

been pressing more closely to her had she been wearing it herself. Bad luck on Mrs. Easy that the bedroom wasn't downstairs.

She said, "Of course, on thinking it over, I believe it's cold water you ought to have on your foot."

He murmured, with closed eyes, "Don't trouble. I've had quite enough water, hot or cold, for one day."

"Oh, I know!" she exclaimed, then. "I ought to have thought of it before. Would you like some brandy?"

He opened his eyes.

"Stupid of me to forget it," she went on. "I'll bring you up a glass."

"Thanks," he said. "I could do with a bottle."

"I've got two bottles in the house."

"Oh, good! That'll keep me going till the doctor comes, anyhow."

"And some Australian Burgundy."

"Yes? I think the brandy would go best."

"I'll bring both bottles up," said Diana. "Then you can keep them here. I expect you'll be here for some time."

"I hope so," said Henry, and tried to smile; but even that was an effort now.

Diana busied herself.

With her flexible nose in the crack of the front door Mrs. Easy watched her come downstairs. She carried a gentleman's entire outfit, down to his very socks. She entered the kitchen, where she left the clothes, and reappeared with a bottle of brandy in either hand. With these bottles she again quickly ascended the stairs to the bedroom. The orgy was unquestionably about to commence.

Very tantalizing. It was impossible to obtain a view of the interior of the bedroom through the window. Mrs. Easy bit her lip, and decided to go round to the back. She might be able to observe something from the back, through the small window on the landing at the bend of the stairs.

At the angle of the cottage she halted, backed to the porch, outward from the porch on to a border, and eventually, by skilful and neck-straining backing, into the coal-shed.

The young man deposited his bicycle in some bushes at the side of the road, and advanced very cautiously, peering at the cottage through the privet hedge, testing the latch of the gate before operating it, avoiding the gravel path; dithered half-heartedly and with protruding teeth halfway between the gate and the cottage; then stealthily pursued his shrinking but conscientious advance. There were already a little notebook and a pencil somewhere in his cuff. Mrs. Easy, wide-eyed in the coal-shed, sensed an ally.

"Does it seem to do you any good?" asked Diana.

"Rather," said Henry, whose colour was returning. "Lots of good. I think I shall carry on with the treatment for a bit, if you don't mind."

"I certainly should," said Diana. "I should drink as much as you possibly can."

"Thanks," said Henry. "There are two bottles, aren't there? I'm not a heavy drinker, as a rule, by any means, but if only you knew the extremity of—never mind about that. But it helps, so I really think I shall go steadily at it, neat. I shall, at the worst, remain quite pleasant. I've been told I am really at my

best on the very exceptional occasions when I fall slightly under the influence of fire-water."

"That's all right," said Diana. "I've the satisfaction of knowing that you won't be able to chase me about the cottage in any case. Now, I'd better go and get the doctor."

"Before you go," said Henry, "let's talk a little. I want to know what's happened about Eleanor, and all sorts of things."

"Yes, and I want to know about you. But——"

"And I about you. That's it. Let's talk."

"But I must get the doctor to you."

"No hurry. What can he do? He'll only start hauling my foot about and hurting me like nothing on earth."

"He may give you something to soothe it."

"I've got that," said Henry. "By the time the doctor arrives, I shall probably be so soothed that I shall mistake him for an annual meeting of the Royal College of Surgeons. Let's just talk for a few minutes."

Diana looked at him with her head on one side. For the second time that day she was very wet and ought to keep on the move. Moreover, her reason for being in the room was to nurse him. Her duty as a nurse was, as she knew from experience, to say, "Well, I must love you and leave you," and to go for the doctor without further delay. But . . .

"Just for a few minutes," he repeated. "It really won't make any difference to the foot—nothing could."

He had awfully nice eyes. Rather like a spaniel. After all, nurses were surely always instructed to humour their patients, if possible. She sat on the foot of the bed.

She told him her experiences of the morning—briefly and not without bitterness against Eleanor. He seemed very regretful about Eleanor, and the tiniest bit regretful that Eleanor's behaviour should arouse in Diana wrath, rather than pity. When she concluded, he shifted his foot with a little "Ow!" of painful effort, then returned readily to the subject of the runagates.

"Do you know my brother?" was his first question.

"No."

"It would be easier for you to understand what I was driving at in coming here, if you knew Reggy."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe Eleanor's the kind of girl who'd smash up a man's home if she thought twice about it; and unless she's warned about this, the home will go wallop this very evening. That's why I came —to warn her. My brother's coming home to-day."

"What! Then he knows already?"

"He knows nothing definitely. If he got home and found her on the drawing-room sofa doing crochet work, he couldn't accuse her of anything."

"I see," said Diana. "Then you sympathize with Eleanor sufficiently to try and pick her up and bung her on the sofa just in time, as it were?"

"Don't you?"

"No," said Diana, slowly. "I think she's behaved rottenly to everybody, including herself."

"I believe she's fond enough of my brother to pull up in time."

"Then that's worse than going ahead, and being openly and defiantly false to him," said Diana.

"M'yes. But there's provocation, mind. My brother is more like a brilliantly accomplished performing

elephant than anything else I can think of at the moment. Listen. I am not an habitual bibber of Three Star brandy. Eleanor is not at heart a sinful person. I am driven to drink brandy by an insufferable pain in my foot. Eleanor is driven to have a fling by a husband who, believe me, is very nearly as good an excuse for her fling as my foot is for my brandy. She's only up to a bit of mischief. She doesn't get any mischief at home."

This failed to cut any ice with Diana.

"Whatever your brother's like, she married him, knowing what he was like. I don't see that she——"

"She married him for his money. I grant you that. And now she's disillusioned and reckless. But if only she could get going properly, she could be a happy woman even with Reggy. She could be happy with anybody. I can see that in her. Only she must have sympathy. That's why she's got mine."

Diana blinked. "She appeals to you very strongly, it appears."

"All her sex appeal to me very strongly," said Henry. "You see, I travel along the extreme edge of the straight and narrow, so most of the ladies I run up against are like myself—on the right track, but only just, and liable to wobble off. Awfully nice people, you know."

Diana smiled with tight lips.

"Don't you think that if you went along the middle of the road you'd meet nicer ones still?" she asked.

"Oh, nicer, I suppose, yes," said Henry, with a little sigh, "but for good company, give me the edge."

Diana got up.

"Well, I suppose it's too late to help Eleanor now, in any case," she said.

He nodded disconsolately. "I wouldn't all hope abandon even now," he said, "only I'm afraid I'm incapacitated for further action."

"Yes; I'll be off for the doctor. I ought not to have hung about so long."

"Righto," said Henry. "I'm very sorry you've got to go."

"Oh, I don't mind going."

"No, but I shall miss your company."

"I shouldn't have thought you would. I'm one of the people who stick to the middle of the road."

"No, you're not. I know what you are. You're one of the people from the middle, who come to the side in the cause of charity—to help the wobblers."

She laughed. "I think that's exactly what you are," she said. "Look here, I must be off."

"Righto," he repeated. "Don't let the doctor bring any ghastly looking apparatus for repairing torn ligaments or putting limbs back. I know what these doctors are—hearty, tormenting blighters. 'Ha! Put your ankle out, have you? Right. I'll just put it back again.' He won't."

"Good-bye," said Diana; "drink plenty of brandy."

"I will."

"Can you read?"

"At present I can."

"You'd better have something to read to try and distract your mind. There are some books downstairs. They'll all be covered with soot, but still—— Oh, *I* know. I expect my uncle's views on the female sex would interest you. I'll bring you selections from his manuscript."

"Is he for or against the sex?" asked Henry.

"Strongly against."

"Oh, well, nothing like a counter-irritation to help me along with this ankle. Bring me Uncle on 'Woman'."

She ran down to the parlour, and fought her way through the smoke to the window which had remained closed since last she had left the cottage. She retrieved and dusted a ream or two of Uncle from the foot of the bookcase. She stood for a moment contemplating the sorry condition of the room. Later in the evening, she must tackle it—a polluting business.

She carried the manuscript upstairs. Henry was in an agonizing position half out of bed, trying to retrieve his tobacco pouch from a small table just out of his reach. She closed the door, and went once more to his assistance.

Berty Pitts, hovering just beyond the porch, heard someone come downstairs. By straining forward he could have caught sight of the someone, but he instinctively drew back and remained in an upright, evasive attitude against the wall of the cottage. The someone entered a room on the ground floor, remained there a few moments and again went upstairs. Berty heard the upstairs door close with, he thought, the decisive slam of a door which is intended to remain closed. He gained sufficient confidence from this to creep round through the porch, and even into the cottage. The kitchen door stood open. The room was unoccupied. From the parlour came no sounds of life, but in a room upstairs were voices. He raised his head and listened. Then, very stealthily, his teeth protruding abnormally, he stole upward to the little landing at the bend of the stairs. Here he again

paused, his heart throbbing, his fingers nervously clutching his pencil and his nasty note-book.

From the room ahead of him, on the right, he could hear the voices plainly now. He could hear what they were saying. He heard one or two sentences; his eyes widened and he licked his pencil.

All of which Mrs. Easy, who had emerged from the coal-shed, and negotiated the bank behind the little landing window, with thrilling relish witnessed.

Diana propped Henry back on to the bed, handed him his pouch and some matches, gently reprimanded him. "I do hope I can trust you to take care of yourself while I'm away."

"I wish you hadn't got to go," he replied. "While you stay here and talk, I forget the pain."

She laughed, and crossed the room to the dressing-table, where she started rearranging her hat, as ladies do, before setting out on an urgent mission through country in which they are unlikely to meet a soul. She wouldn't be long, she said. The doctor would motor her back.

He sighed.

"Really, I mean it," he said. "When you sit on the bed and talk, I don't feel the pain. If I don't feel the pain, why go for the doctor?"

She completed her toilet and returned to the bedside. By this time Berty Pitts was on the landing.

"We mustn't go on any longer like this," were the first words that fell upon the ear of the stairway detective. "I'm beginning to blame myself for being here with you now. Think of the injury I may be doing you."

"The injury's done now; and it's very sweet of you

to bother so much about me. After all, it's rather a poisonous prospect for you, too."

"Oh, I don't mind. At first I thought it was awful to have to go so far. But now I do it regularly, and I'm getting hardened to it."

Passages even more unblushing followed—passages which held Berty scribbling incriminations he could scarcely credit. From Mrs. Bingham—"Anyhow, I can't stop now and you mustn't ask me to. It's for your own sake." From the man—Gascoyne, or whatever Mrs. Piper had said his name was—"*I* don't want to let you go a bit." And, "You make me forget my troubles," and, "If we're parted now, it'll only drive me to the bottle." Then she, "Are you comfy?"

Berty felt encouraged (either by the remarkable success that was attending his efforts on Mrs. Piper's behalf, or by personal curiosity, in which considerations of the dear soul were, for once, forgotten) to extend his researches to the heroic hazard of a keyhole reconnaissance. He advanced an adventurous foot. A loose stairboard creaked loudly, and fear, like an electric current, thrilled the nerves of his scalp. He slapped an ungoverned hand to the banister, and dropped his note-book into the hall.

He cared not how quickly, how noisily his descent was accomplished. He used the banisters as sloping parallel bars, down which he slid. He snapped up the note-book as an urchin snaps up a misdirected golf-ball, and scooted for the porch, for the gate, for the bush, for the bicycle.

Mrs. Easy, who had occasionally taken brief superintendence of the literature enjoyed by little Easy, had long since decided what Berty Pitts was doing there.

Mr. Hole had received her wire, and had immediately despatched a detective to the cottage. Quick work, but, as Mrs. Easy had gathered from the career of Bloodhound Baxter—Sleuth, and other heroes of little Easy's threepenny library, them detectives possessed an extraordinary gift for being on the spot at the right time. But, even so, did he know all? Did he know of the double bed, of the brandy, of the stripping? She might be able to put an extra note or two in his book for him.

As Berty Pitts snatched his bicycle into the road and gripped the low handle-bars, he saw a woman hurrying after him through the trees above the cottage, and violently gesticulating. Assailed by more electric head-treatment, Berty thrust his cycle at the slope of the zigzag, and essayed a hopping, panic-stricken get-away. Mrs. Easy retained, however, the presence of mind requisite in one's dealings with sleuths. She gained the edge of the steep bank beside the roadway, and shouted after him, "Hold on; I speak as a friend."

Berty hesitated.

"If you come back here," said Mrs. Easy, "I can likely tell you more than what you know."

Berty retraced a few paces, still guardedly heading his cycle in the direction of escape.

"I don't think I'd better wait," he said. "I'm in rather a hurry to go."

"Yes, so I noticed," said Mrs. Easy, from the bank. "Oh, I was watching you, with all your clever ways. I speak as a friend," she repeated, hastily.

"Well, what is it you want to say? I can't wait."

"I know," said Mrs. Easy, "one or two things which

not even you may 'ave yet found out as regarding what is going on inside that cottage."

"I think I know enough," said Berty.

"Ah! But do you know all? Do you know as 'ow the single bed was removed from that room this morning, and a double subsistuated?"

"A double bed?"

"Ah! You see—with all your knowing ways. And at the bedside two bottles o' brandy specially got in. Oh, not for ordinary mealtime drinking—for boozing there in the bed. Two bottles!"

"Really? Good gracious! No, I——"

"Ah! You see? You'd start peddling off with only 'alf the worst known. And *that's* not all."

"Really? Still—that's all right, thanks. I think I'll be——"

"Do you know," continued Mrs. Easy, indomitably, "that that young man is lying upon that there bed without a stitch of clothing upon his person?"

"What? How do you know? Is there anywhere where you can see into the room from?" asked Berty, with a tentative movement of the front wheel of his bicycle.

"No," said Mrs. Easy. "But you can put it down in your little book and take it from me. And there may be one or two more things I can think of if——"

"Thanks," said Berty. "That'll do, thanks. Oh—yes. There is one thing. The other lady, where is she?"

"What other lady?"

"The sister?"

"Whose sister?"

"Er—his sister."

"Go on!" said Mrs. Easy, contemptuously. "His sister!"

"Oh; then they are alone here together? No other lady here at all?"

"Not likely," replied Mrs. Easy. "Did they *sound* to you as if they was hoping to see their sisters?"

"I see," said Berty. "Many thanks. Only, I say, don't tell any one you saw me here, will you?"

"I said I spoke as a friend, didn't I?" said Mrs. Easy. "Let that suffice. What I speaks as, I acts as."

"Good!" said Berty. "Many thanks—good-bye!"

He willingly attacked the upward slush of the zig-zag, well satisfied. This woman, whoever she was, would not give him away. And she had confirmed his impressions, and added to his store of information. It was not really at all surprising about the sister. The dear soul had had her doubts about the sister still being there. With lightened heart, Berty faced the ravages of rain and fatigue upon his homeward way.

Well satisfied was Mrs. Easy, too. Her work of vengeance was well-nigh completed. Just one more peep through the landing window, and she could return home to change her wet clothes and cheerfully await the inevitable and devastating visitation of the morrow upon the deserving victims of her proficient indignation.

She manœuvred back through the trees and down the slope, to her landing window. In so doing, she missed seeing Diana, who quitted the cottage at the same time and passed through the gate unheard. By the time Mrs. Easy was back at the foot of the bank, twitching her nose through the window, Diana was half-

way up the hill, on her innocent and unsuspecting mission; while Berty Pitts, his head lowered over his racing bars, in his breast pocket verbatim evidence so startling as to necessitate paraphrase on the telephone, churned the Chool Road.

Mrs. Easy, with a final sniff of triumph, turned and went home, leaving the cottage a deserted, a begrimed, a dripping prison, wherein languished one solitary sufferer, methodically fortifying himself with his only material solace, and apathetically turning the virulent pages of Hole on "Woman."

CHAPTER XII

PATIENTS

FOR many minutes after Diana had left the cottage, Henry lay suffering very severely. He had no thought for anything except his foot—his accursed foot—ache—ache. He got that deadly sensation which sometimes will attack the mind during pain, or while one is performing some finicky task—that oppression of the present. Presumably, some time in the future, the pain will have gone, the task will be completed. But here it is now—the pain is here now—now—the task is not done yet—not yet.

Then the fingers stiffen in exasperation at the task—the nerves concentrate to the pain—one's whole system seems near some maddened point of breakage. Henry felt goaded to move, knowing full well that to move meant a spasm of pain. Actually, he did move, rather than lie still and have his nerves goaded by that fiend of the present tense. Pain shot from his foot and knifed his whole system. Even in that, there was a cruel, paradoxical feeling of relief.

Dismal—solitary. If he shouted aloud, there was none to hear. He felt goaded to shout, too, as a sort of aimless change. The spasm of pain passed and he lay back exhausted and feeling the cold of the sweat on his forehead.

He put out a hand and grasped the neck of the

bottle at his elbow, as some poor wretch, blinded with agony, may turn and grasp the weapon to end it.

Then, with an effort, he mastered his thoughts and forbade them to dwell on the ache. It was not easy to do this, or to enforce it. There wasn't much else to think about. Absolute desolation. Rain on the roof. Hole on "Woman."

That girl—a sweet, natural girl. A sweet face. He admired that type. And not only in looks attractive, but in the bright, confident self-possession of her nature. She had brushed his cheek with hers as she helped him on to the bed, but she hadn't remarked on it at all. So many girls would have glared, as if it had been his fault; or giggled, as if it had been their intention. But she hadn't. She must have noticed it, though. P'raps she had rather enjoyed it.

Hallo! He had forgotten his foot for a whole minute. It was better—the ache was really better. Ar'ch! But he must keep his mind off it.

Woman. Now, what was all this trouble of Uncle's? "Woman" in Five Parts. Part Four: Woman of the Orient. Section One: Traditional. Section Two: Historic. Section Three: Philosophical. Section One: Traditional:—

As we duly noted in that portion of this survey devoted to the Old Testament (*vide* Part I. Sec. II. Preface. P. 34. Footnote on Rachel) it is to the Orient that we must turn for the purest conception and the most rational and logical observance of the prerogative of the female sex. Here the mind of man, untainted by the false doctrines of modernism, and still uncontaminated with the sphacelus of scientific quackery, has ever derived inspiration, direct and unadulterated, from the Divine fount of Wisdom.

Here, steady on, Uncle! Come to the point, you old goof. They know how to treat 'em in the East? Well, why not say so, instead of tying yourself up in great knots of lingo? No; pages of that sort of thing. Stop a bit; what was this?

From the queen of the *beau monde* to the trull of the gutter, the Western woman sways a vile and unchartered ascendency over her natural despot, schooled by traditions loathsome to the simpler and more saintly Orient mind. Her natural and patent duties are performed at a bargain. We dumbfoundedly witness the astounding sentiment of "give and take" being applied even to marriage. In the Eastern world, despite the high-flown and erotic rhapsodies of certain romanticists and poets, a woman is born not only exclusively to give, but to give by choice. All that she takes, she takes at her master's indulgence. The only bargain she obtains is the bargain of the whip.

Henry laid the manuscript aside with a smile.

"I wonder what the girl did to Uncle," was his reflective comment.

Berty Pitts, in a condition closely resembling that of a dog exhausted by swimming, pulled up at the Ring o' Bells, and propped his offensive vehicle in the yard. Muriel, repressing her curiosity, informed him that he could telephone from the private room used as an office, and conducted him thither. Telephony in the West Country is still almost invariably conducted by means of those instruments upon which one has to press firmly while grinding a little handle in order to awaken the soporific damsel who presides at the exchange, while subsequent conversation can only, for some remarkable scientific reason, be effected by employing

a species of "try your grip" exercise on the receiver. Berty, after some delay, issued his trunk call to a distant lady, who received it as though making a note of an unimportant engagement six weeks ahead. Berty sighed, sadly contemplated his outraged attire, and asked Muriel for tea while he waited for the call to come through.

He was still waiting when Diana passed the hotel. For a girl who had walked about eleven miles, and driven eight, in the course of the wet day, she seemed splendidly fresh. She had found it necessary to keep to the side of the Chool Road and, in this connection, had recalled her conversation with the kindly soul she had left at the cottage. And when she got to South Ditherton her first objective was not the doctor's house. She went to the post office.

She might yet be in time to warn Eleanor. She sent another wire to Mrs. Krabbe:

> Have heard husband returning unexpectedly to-day inform them if possible.
>
> DIANA

This was soul-satisfying all round. It was her practical duty to rescue her brother from a scrape if she could. It was her moral duty to consider the wishes of the unfortunate would-be preserver at the cottage. And it afforded a pleasing feeling of immense superiority over Eleanor—Eleanor, the slipping wayfarer at the side of the road; Diana's, the hand of rescue, stretched from the moral middle.

Diana's ring at the doctor's door-bell was the signal for canine uproar from apparently every quarter of the

house. After a few moments the doctor's wife put a worried head through the open window of a front room, and thus addressed the visitor:

"Do you want the doctor? Quiet, Shrimp! Excuse me not coming to the door, but I can't very well, because several of the dogs are loose in the hall, and I've got a bitch who is just going to begin whelping in here, because the stable roof has sprung a leak and if I opened this door some of the other dogs might get in and upset her. I'm afraid the doctor's out."

"Oh, dear!" said Diana. "It's something very important."

"I can take a message. Shrimp, dear, lie down again. Missus will come back to you in one second. Perhaps, if you could tell me through the window—— Shrimpy, dulling! do stay on your nice whelping board. It's so very important that you should, you know. Now?"

"April Cottage, Chool," shouted Diana, against the belling in the hall. "A man with, very likely, a broken ankle."

"Oh, yes?" said the doctor's wife, calmly. "All right. Thank you. Rip! Will you not make such a noise out there! You're disturbing Shrimp. I'm afraid I don't know exactly what time he'll be back, but I'll tell him when he comes."

"Yes, but—you understand, it's terribly important," cried Diana. "The accident happened nearly two hours ago. The man's in agony. I must find a doctor at once for him. Is there a doctor at the next place—Filcombe, isn't it called? I simply must——"

"He won't be long, I'm sure. I'll see that he's told. There's nobody at Filcombe at all. It's a most dead-

and-alive place. My husband attends all the people there."

"Well, I'd better wait," said Diana.

"Just as you please. I'm afraid I can't ask you in, or, of course, I would. This is the consulting room, and there's another bitch in the drawing room. She's coming on, and I have to keep her apart from the others, too. Of course, she *would* choose this time. She's always inconvenient in her little arrangements. There, Shrimpy! *Do* do what Missus tells you, dulling!"

"Well, I simply don't know what I'd better do. You see——"

"I know what it is," said the doctor's wife, sympathetically. "These things always happen like that. I had a Great Dane that got injured just when the vet. was away at a meet. We had to have him destroyed."

"I'm afraid I can't very well go back and destroy my friend," said Diana, who was getting steadily deafened and irritated. "But will you promise to send the doctor out directly he comes back?"

"Oh, yes. I promise you that."

"There'll be no delay, will there?"

"No, no. Oh, no. The moment he—— R-rip!"

The doctor's wife withdrew her head from the window. Diana clenched her teeth in her annoyance. She glanced at her wrist-watch. It was half-past five. She would stand on the doorstep in the rain until the doctor returned.

The Alsatian wolf-hound that had bitten little Easy put its head round a corner of a conservatory and growled. The doctor's wife returned to the window. From all parts of the house still resounded baying and yelps of challenge. Incited, no doubt, by these, the

Alsatian wolf-hound slowly rounded the conservatory and advanced, snarling.

"Oh, my goodness!" said the doctor's wife. "I didn't know Wotan was loose. What a nuisance! He'll get wet. I don't know how he got out. He must have got through the dining-room window. Don't be afraid. He doesn't mean any harm; only he's rather savage."

Diana, who was but human, closed the front gate only just in time. From the house came a frenzied, cataphonic pæan to the glory of Wotan.

The doctor's wife, a conscientious woman, experienced a good deal of difficulty in fulfilling her first duty. She must make a note of this call on her husband's services, or it would slip her memory. Her first duty, though, was, of course, to pacify poor Shrimpy in the face of this unnerving liveliness.

After several minutes, she succeeded in enticing her favourite into a position of wheezing recumbency on the whelping board. The doctor's wife then turned to the writing table.

Oh, but Wotan must be called in before he got too wet. He made such a terrific mess of the house when he was wet, and it was difficult enough to keep servants in any case. In order to get Wotan into the dining room through the hall, it was necessary temporarily to remove his *bête noire*, Tango, from the precincts of the hall, and, with Nina monopolizing the drawing room, and the cat being in the kitchen, the only possible thing to do with Tango was to put him in the lavatory.

Tango, being disobedient and displaying a marked

aversion to the lavatory, enabled Rip to get into the consulting room and to frighten Shrimpy off her whelping board; while Wotan, having successfully expelled the female client, was now triumphantly uprooting a bone from beneath some budding geraniums in the front garden; and Nina, resenting her drawing-room Coventry, had managed to scramble on to the window ledge, where there were some vases. Upstairs, Fifi and Rascal had, to judge from their sounds, discovered some unexpected ratting in the spare bedroom.

"Children, children!" said the doctor's wife. "You really are rather a handful sometimes." She was single-handed. The cook had gone to see why the man hadn't come to mend the stable roof. The housemaid had left, abandoning a fortnight's wages, by the first train that morning. It was thus some time before the doctor's wife found the opportunity to return to the writing table and make her note, while the details were still fresh in her memory.

"Something Cottage, Filcombe. Man with broken arm. Forget name of cottage. Anybody in Filcombe sure to know."

Now, with perplexity, came to Diana exhaustion. As she stood dismally in the roadway, she realized the weariness of her bones, the heaviness of her feet. If only the doctor would sail round the corner in his car! Just as she was beginning to feel inclined to fling herself down on the wet bank at the roadside, and to give way to despair, she heard the sound of a motor approaching. It turned the corner and came toward her. It was not the doctor's car. It was only a van —but it was Pitcher's van.

Diana hailed the toad. He drew up, and came into neutral with a shriek of tortured metal.

"Are you going toward April Cottage?" called Diana.

"What, you again?" replied Pitcher's driver. "Noo; I ain't goin' past along o' Chool. That way I do be goin', but be the main road."

"You can go through Chool, and drop me, can't you?"

"It be a long way round. I got to get back to the shop before he closes. Was you goin' straight ther'?"

"Well—I wanted to call at the chemist's; and also, if possible, at somewhere where I could ring up the doctor's wife from, to remind her of something I've just told her."

The driver shook his head.

"I dar'n't bide," he said.

"All right," said Diana; "I'll take the lift and chance it."

Without further invitation, she clambered into the van. The toad changed gears with strange, corresponding changes of facial expression, and jerked into progress.

"I dar'n't let meself to think," said the toad, with no little sense of his own benevolence, "what they would say at the shop to my goin' all around be way of Chool, if they was to know that I was goin' via he."

Diana plucked up her spirits. She had misgivings about the doctor's wife, but the latter was probably more reliable than she appeared during the ordeal of Shrimpy's whelping. As for the chemist, probably no chemist could supply anything that would improve the

foot. What the Downblotton chemist, Bather, might prescribe, would almost certainly do more harm than good. The chemist was better left alone till the doctor called.

Besides, this Mr. Bingham kept telling her that it was her company which brought him the greatest relief, and sounded as if he meant it. So the sooner she got back to the cottage, the better. And it was a quarter to six. Tea-time was long overdue.

A quarter to six. At a quarter to six our old friend, Mr. Benbow Hole, of Hole on "Woman," was glaring from a railway carriage at the town of Peterborough. Peterborough, though by no means as wet as Chool, can seldom have been much wetter in June. A parson with spectacles, sitting opposite Mr. Hole, noticed the old gentleman's expression as he surveyed Peterborough, and remarked:

"Wet, isn't it?"

Mr. Hole transferred his glare to the parson.

"Yes," he replied, deliberately; "at a guess I should say that there must be just about one drop of rain to every damn fool in the world."

The conversation then languished, and before very long the parson pretended to go along the corridor to search for a late tea, and changed his carriage.

At the Harrogate booking office, Mr. Hole had inquired for the first train to Bristol. The booking clerk had scratched his head.

"To Bristol?" he repeated, dubiously.

"To Bristol," said Mr. Hole. "To Bristol. To—to—Bristol—Bristol—— To Bristol."

The clerk, after some research, informed him. By attempting to travel in a direct route across country

to Bristol, he would arrive at that city at the hour of three minutes to one A. M.

"Really!" said Mr. Hole. "I infer that the directors of the railway companies, being born owls, are anxious to impose the habits of owls upon the general public. I can get to Bristol earlier by going to London, I belive. Can I not?"

Further investigation proved that this was the case. By arriving at King's Cross at 7.10 and leaving Paddington at eight, Mr. Hole could make Bristol by 10.20. This he decided to do, and here he is at 5.45, scowling at Peterborough.

But, by this time, certain other events had taken place elsewhere. A modest tinkle from the homely office-parlour of the Ring o' Bells at length summoned Berty Pitts from his tea to his duty. At the other end of the line Louise was already twittering excitedly.

And even as she "hallo'd" to greet the far-away voice of her faithful steward, there sounded from heaven a crash of thunder, and through her dining-room doorway strode, like Vengeance, the massive figure of Reginald.

CHAPTER XIII

SOUND AND FURY

HE SLAPPED his umbrella to the dining-room table, with an instinctive "Stop that; I am here." Louise, from the telephone on the writing table, eyed him, smiled, and continued to nod reassuringly, while yet straining her ears for Berty.

"Hallo?" came the solicitous voice of the latter, while yet a great way off.

"Hallo!" cried Louise. "Is that you? Hold the line. My brother is here."

Reginald drew himself up—all nostrils. "To whom are you speaking of me? What concern is it of that person——?"

Violent nods, smiles, and agitated whispering aside by Louise.

"I'll tell you in a moment. Just one moment, and I'll expl—— Hallo!"

"Hallo?"

"Hallo, Berty. Listen. My brother is here——"

"Berty?" cried Reginald, advancing upon the writing table. "What is this? Put that receiver down this instant, and speak to me."

"All right. In one moment," said Louise. "If one doesn't continue to gabble the whole time, the people on the exchange think you've finished and cut you off. They always do that. Hallo! Berty? Hallo!"

"Hallo?" came accents like the last despairing farewell of a departing soul.

"Can you hear me?"

"Hallo?" said Berty, just audible, and now, apparently, at the actual moment of passing into the Beyond.

"Oh, dear! Hallo!"

"Stop that, I tell you. Berty? Who and what——?"

"One moment. Hallo!"

"Hallo?" from Hades.

"Hold the line."

"What?"

"Hallo?"

"Is that you, dear soul?" implored Berty.

"Don't be impertinent," said the lady at the exchange. "I'll put you through in a minute."

"I'll explain the whole thing," said Louise. "Only I must just—— Hallo! Hallo, *Exchange!*"

"Put the thing down and stop that, do you hear me?" roared Reginald. "Listen to me—to *me*." He beat himself savagely on the chest. He was in small humour, you will remember, for bubble and squeak. While Louise still vainly cooed and nodded and frowned and blinked and "hallo'ed," he bellowed above her, his fists quivering aloft: "Do you think I have abandoned a couple of big business deals and returned from Paris in order to listen to you talking some tingle-tangle on the telephone? Put it down, I say; or, by Christopher I'll——"

"You're thrrrough now," said the lady on the exchange.

"Oh! Hallo!"

"Ah! Hallo?"

"Hallo! That's better."

"Hallo!"
"Hallo?"
"Now——"
"Yes."
"Hallo!"
"Yes. That's better."
"Listen. Berty! Hold the line."
"What?"
"Hold the line."
"I am."
"Yes, but——
"Yes, but my brother's just arrived."
"What?"
"My brother. Mr. Bingham. Her wife. I mean, his w—— I mean, her husband. He's arrived. I want to—— Hallo?"
"What?"
"Hold the line a moment."
"I am."
"Yes, but——"
"Do you want to drive me to assault?" asked Reginald.
"One moment. It's all to do with you, Reggy. Hallo, Berty?"
"Yes?"
"Hold the line."

Louise turned, still cramming the receiver to the side of her head. To Reginald she discharged a breathless *résumé* of her tactics and measures. Reggy had told her to act as she thought best. She had done so. She gave a brief outline of Berty Pitts. Berty Pitts, during this interval, retired again to Hades, whence he continued to "Hallo" in a plaintive pianissimo.

"A boy?" fumed Reginald. "A boy?"

"Well, a young man," said Louise. "I——"

"Investigating my private affairs? Have you taken leave of your senses? What bumble-puppy, in heaven's name, have you been up to?"

He seized the receiver, and dragged it away from her. His neck bulged, swollen and crimson, above a collar sagging in exhaustion.

All the while Berty continued, "Hallo? Hal-*lo?* *Hal*-lo? Hal-*lo?*"

"Your time is up. Do you want another thrrree minutes?" said the lady at the exchange.

"Oh, but I haven't spoken at all yet," said Berty.

"Excuse *me*."

"Well—but, I mean—I have spoken, but——"

"Then you shouldn't say you haven't. I will put you through for another thrrree minutes."

"Now!" said Reginald. "Are you there?"

"Hallo?"

"Don't you hallo me. Are you——"

Louise managed to squeeze her face into speaking range.

"It's my brother—Mrs. Bingham's husband. You may tell him all."

Reginald shouldered her into oblivion. The voice of Berty replied in a melancholy tenor.

"But, oh, dear soul, if you but knew——"

"Stop that," shouted Reginald. "I know where to go if I wish to listen to ballads, thank you. Now! What have you been up to? Come!"

"Hallo?"

"Will you stop hallo-ing at me, blast it! Am I hunting! Tell me what you have been up to."

"Oh. What? Well—— I—I've been to the place. I—er—are you there?"

"You may think yourself pretty lucky that I am not where *you* are. Go on."

"Oh! Well—er—I went there—er——"

"Will you kindly tell me in so many plain words what you have been up to! Without repeating everything three times. If I want to listen to anthems I know where to go and listen to anthems. I have not come all the way from Paris, leaving some most important business deals, to listen to anthems. If you are capable of understanding six consecutive words of simple, grammatical Anglo-Saxon, what—have—you—been—up—to?"

"Are you speaking?" asked the lady at the exchange.

"Don't *you* begin," snorted Reginald. "Once and for all, now. You take my advice and stop that, or you'll be sorry. Now, you! Your report. Come!"

"Hallo?" said Berty, who had been in the unknown again, for a brief season.

Reginald turned, fuming, bubbling with fury, to Louise.

"Who is this doodle that you have employed? Eh? Where did you get him from? Where did you find him? A barnyard? A barnyard?"

"Hallo?" said Berty.

"Speak up, London," said the exchange lady.

Reginald crashed heavy, beringed fingers on to the writing table.

"Stop your clacking, will you!"

"Do you want to go on speaking?"

"I do. That is precisely what I do want. And if,

on the other hand, I happen to want monkeys, I am quite capable of——"

"Hallo?" said Berty.

"Now! You! Well?"

"Oh! I—er—got cut off, I think."

"You will be," replied Reginald, "if I have any more of this diddling. Now! Your report!"

"Oh. Well, sir, as I say, I went—er—to this place. There was no one there. I mean, I didn't—— Hallo?"

"Prrrress the receiver, Downblotton," said the exchange lady.

"Hallo? Well, as I say, I went to this place, and there was no one there. At least, I mean, there was, but I didn't see any one. At least, that is to say, I saw a woman."

"Where did you find this ullage? Where, in God's name? A scullery? A pig house?"

"And she told me they were upstairs together in the bedroom."

"Who?"

"This other woman."

"The other woman was upstairs?"

"No, no. She——"

"The other woman is the sister," interposed Louise.

"Stop that, will you? You! Who told you who was upstairs in the bedroom?"

Louise pricked up her ears.

"Mrs. Bingham was upstairs—with him. They were together in the bedroom. In fact, I'm afraid they—they—were——"

"They were what?"

"In bed."

"Oh, the devil!" muttered Reginald.

"What?" asked Louise, unable to contain herself. "What does he say?"

"Oh, stop that, I tell you. You! Go on."

"I hardly like——"

"Go on, I say."

"Well, they—er—as I say, they were in bed."

"How do you know?"

"I heard."

"How can you hear whether a person or persons is or are in bed?"

"What?" asked Louise, goggling.

"Stop that. You! How do you know, I repeat?"

"I beg your pardon? Oh, I—well, I heard what they were saying."

"And what were they saying?"

"I—I've got it written down, but I can't very well read it."

"You can't read your own writing?"

"Yes, but—oh, first of all, they had a double bed brought in on purpose."

"On purpose?"

"I beg pardon? Oh, well, anyhow, they had a double bed brought in. There was a single bed, and they had it taken out, and a double one brought in and some brandy—two bottles—in the room——"

"What, what, what?"

"Brandy. Two bott——"

"Brandy? What for?"

"Erm—I don't know quite. I suppose . . ."

"You suppose what?"

"I beg pardon? Well—I don't know quite, but I

suppose the idea was to sort of—drink and—I don't know; anyhow, they, they had it there with them. Oh, and there was another thing."

"What?"

"Well, I—on the telephone, sir, and all—it's not very—— Besides, I was only told this by the other woman."

"What other woman, you——?"

"The sister," said Louise.

"For the last time, will you stop that? You! The other woman. Who was she?"

"I don't know exactly. I met her outside. I think she was a sort of caretaker. She told me——"

"But you said you heard for yourself?"

"Er—yes, but . . ."

"What did you hear?"

"Oh, but I can't—really, I mean—on the teleph——"

"What—did—you—hear? I ask."

"What they were saying in the bedroom, but——"

"And what did they say? Do you want to drive me to frenzy? Can you remember what you heard them say?"

"Yes, I—I noted it down, but——"

"Then read it."

A gulp of embarrassment was clearly audible. Then Berty played his last card.

"The man had taken off all his clothes," he said.

"What! Did you hear him say so?"

"No, but—the other woman told me that. Oh, and the sister wasn't there at all. Mrs. Piper said she might not be. She'd gone. At least, if she'd been there at all, she'd gone. But——"

"You have notes?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"You have eyes?"

"I beg pardon? Yes, but——"

"You have a mouth?"

"I beg pardon?"

"Read your notes of what they said."

"Oh-h! Well, first of all, so far as I heard, he said to her—— No; first of all she said to him——"

"Your time is up," said the exchange lady.

"More," said Reginald.

"I'm sorry. But you've had six minutes, and the line——"

Reginald fisted a pen tray.

"I've quite enough to contend with as it is. If I have any miouwing from you, by Christopher, I'll have you kicked clean out. You be careful who you're dealing with."

"Don't be cross with him," said Louise. "He's doing his best, I'm sure."

Reginald shot out a forefinger.

"Out of this room with you, into the passage, until I've finished, or I'll put you there, you flickering poll-parrot."

"Reggy!"

"Now! You! Hallo, there! Connect me, will you!" Bang, bang, bang, bang, with his fingers on the telephone lever. "You, I say! At the exchange!"

From the bowels of the telephone system, echoed sounds appalling and ear-splitting. Then a lusty masculine voice.

"Hallo, Billy, old bean! That you?"

He was near the end of his tether—his collar was no longer a collar. His face was purple. Even Louise

shrank toward the doorway. He gathered himself for a final effort. The fist which held the receiver to his ear shook with passion.

"You! Woman at the exchange! Remove this howling cad."

To him, by some mechanical fluke, replied the voice of Berty gabbling the dire secrets of the note-book. Reginald cut him short and bade the palsied youth begin again.

A deadly silencing malignity seemed to quell him now, as he listened, crouched, attentive, like some gigantic beast of prey in that most menacing moment before the deadly plunge. His breath came in long, whistling snuffles through his enlarged nostrils. His eyes bulged. Throbs shook his pendulous multiplicity of chin. Occasionally he said, "Go on!" in a voice which vibrated with arduous restraint.

Berty concluded. "That's all, sir, as far as I heard."

Still exercising great restraint, Reginald managed to put a few further questions. This woman—the caretaker woman? Would she give the alarm? Oh, no. She seemed quite averse to the whole thing. The couple sounded as though it was their intention to remain at the cottage for the present? Oh, most decidedly. They seemed to be there for—well, some time. They would hardly have gone to bed otherwise. Then followed orders, issued in a tone which brooked no disobedience. Berty was to stay where he was. Where was he? At the what—the Ring o' Bells Hotel, South Ditherton. Very well, then. He was to remain there, and to await the arrival of the speaker who would proceed down immediately by road. Berty sighed deeply

to hear this, but did himself more harm than good by sighing.

"Well, there? Hallo, I say! Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir, I——"

"And you will do what I tell you?"

"Yes; oh, yes. Very well."

"Then say so. Don't make flute noises at me, but say so."

"Yes, yes. Very well, sir. All right."

"H'm. Then see to it."

He crashed home the receiver, and turned.

Then burst the storm. A poor minor effort still rumbled in the heavens. He put it to shame. He pounded the table with his fist. The pen tray leapt into the air. He flung to his feet, overturning his chair. Fury, like an evil spirit, possessed and flooded him.

"What have I married?" he shouted. "My saints, what thing have I married? A common baggage? An everyday, how-de-do, afternoon tart, my soul?" He beat the air with his raised fists.

"Reggy! Reggy, dear . . ."

"Don't speak to me. Get your hat; you shall come with me to this place."

"Yes, but what——?"

"Your hat!"

She fluttered to the doorway and hopped out of the room, like a bird escaping from captivity. He remained in the dining room, terrible; a man in the full power of passion; destructive: the wrath throbbing and seething in him as the boiling water throbs and seethes in a cauldron. He snatched up his umbrella and threw it aside. Some papers lay on the dining-room table. He swept them to the floor with a fling of the arm. A little

Pomeranian dog with a blue bow and a running nose—a perquisite of the cook's, who refused to remain in any situation without it—came, following the scent of strange boots, into the dining room, and queried Reginald's feet. He shot a glance down at it, closed his eyes and took a wild kick at the dog, missed it and caught the leg of the table. He blundered fiercely round the room, pushing chairs aside; his fingers twitching at the ornaments.

Then, relieved at finding something to handle, he returned to the telephone. Called up his house at Prince's Gate. Infuriating delay and lever-banging. Then the voice of the cook.

"Well?"

"Don't you well me, or I'll send you neck and crop out of the house. It is Mr. Bingham speaking."

"Mr. Bingham?" This was a startler for cook, but patently the truth.

"Yes; your master. And don't you forget it."

He ordered the car to be ready and waiting for him within five minutes. Was Wimble, the chauffeur, there? He was about the place. Lucky for Wimble. In five minutes. Outside the house. Flogged down the receiver again.

Willy, who had relied on the boat-train being punctual, chose this ill-timed moment to return to the flat. He heard his brother-in-law on the telephone in the dining room. From his wife's room came the sound of drawers being busily exercised in their sockets. Thither, still in his dripping mackintosh, Willy proceeded.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I'm going down to the place where Eleanor is.

Reggy is going. He is furious. It's just as well I should go."

"But—what information have you got?"

"Oh, don't you start worrying me with questions now."

"No, but, dash it—if there's going to be a row——"

"Oh, there's going to be a row, all right," replied Louise with a cold laugh for the excess of her triumph.

"Yes. Well, I don't see why you should be lugged into it. I won't have it. Dash it, I've stood a good deal——"

"I've no time to waste in arguing."

"All very well. This may lead to devilish trouble. It's all pure surmise."

"Indeed, it is no such thing. Do you think I haven't made sure?"

"How have you made sure?"

"I sent down and found out."

"What? Sent down? Sent who down?"

"I took what steps I thought fit. Don't you begin——"

"Who did you send? Come on, now. This is going to lead to an infernal family rumpus, and I jolly well intend to know what's been going on."

"If you want to know what's going on, you'd better ask Reggy. He's just been told on the telephone."

"Who by?"

"The person I sent."

"Who?"

"I sent Berty Pitts."

"What!"

"Oh, don't stand in the way. I'm in a hurry."

"You needn't hurry," said Willy. "You're not going."

"I am going."

"Are you! I've put up with a good deal. You're not going. You've done harm enough. You mean to tell me you actually sent that——"

"Louise!" bawled Reginald from the dining room. "Will you hurry yourself!"

"I'm coming now."

"You're not," said Willy. "By gosh, I've stuck a good deal. I'm going to see that you——"

She hurried past him down the passage and into the dining room, Willy at her heels. The latter gained the front door. Next moment Reginald came sailing down upon him from the dining room, his hat crushed upon his head, his umbrella gripped by its middle. Willy stood firm.

"Look here, Reggy; I've just heard what Louise has been doing and I object. I won't have her drawn any further into this, and I won't have her go down with you. So you can——"

Reginald heaved back his mountain of chest.

"Out of my road, you blot!" he roared; and seizing Willy by the arm, he flung him into the umbrella-stand.

Next moment the door was hurled back on its hinges. Louise scuttled past and through; then Reginald. Bang! the door. By the time Willy had picked himself up and opened it again, they were downstairs.

The injured husband hurried to the dining-room window just in time to see a taxi splashing away from the front door through the rain.

"Oh, very well, then," said Willy, undefeated.

He turned to the devastated writing table, and from a leather rack pulled out a Bradshaw's Guide. From beneath the sanctuary of the sideboard, the little dog, still quivering like a released spring, watched him with rolling eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER TELEGRAM IN ANOTHER BOSOM

ELEANOR'S guardian angel lay stunned and derelict somewhere on the Bath Road. She had decided that his services would not be required this evening. Indeed, she was taking good care to see that he did not press them upon her.

This was one of the occasions on which she meant to go full tilt for folly and hang the consequences! She looked as though she had experienced this mood before. We, who have credited her with having come in innocence to Reginald's arms—without actual previous inquiry into those things that Mother knows—might glance at her now, and wonder whether we had not been flattering her.

Have we, in this surmise, flattered her? Of course, we know that she leant instinctively toward honour for the most part; but even this she did spasmodically rather—a creature of impulse, whatever the motive, good or bad. Her girlhood had been an orphaned, inefficiently guarded, indefinite, shadowy period. Some of these continental finishing schools, my hat! She finished her education pretty wise, I'll warrant.

Then there is that quick turn of her head toward excitement; that keen appetite for the new experience, the new plaything. That had been in her nature from the first; nor rested content, surely, with the latest style in shingling and Paris models? We know the

fascination she held for the subservient sex. Reginald himself had to swim through a sea of flannel bags to get at her.

Suppose then that she had, in her time, ventured to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and plucked an apple or two. Did she steal there, with guilt thumping in her bosom and with eyes side-to-side in conscience-stricken care? Not she. She would have been caught up in a whirl of recklessness, into a mood of devil-may-care (and he did, I expect) jubilant folly. Knowing what she did to be wrong, but feeling that somehow it didn't matter if it was wrong, because she was not her ordinary good self and hadn't to worry whether it was wrong or not. A sort of abandoned holiday of the soul.

And she was, all the time, a woman who had strong, eager moments of resistance and regret. But not for one of these lapses. She'd look back at them with bewilderment at herself, but not with remorse. Any little act of unkindness or ill-temper would bring her twice as much mortification. I daresay that you yourself have had a bite at the fruit of the tree now and again, and can understand.

If, then, she had erred (which is only guesswork) she had done so in this mood, and this was the mood that was with her now. She was full tilt for the tree. In high spirits, and with only a laugh for the rain and the discomforts of her drive. And looking her best—weather-nipped in the cheeks.

They arrived at Algy's rooms at five thirty.

Algy said he had better take the car along and garage it. He had been warned not to leave it knocking about in Half Moon Street, and he had good reason to avoid being taken an interest in by the police force. So the

hall-porter removed Eleanor's luggage and showed her upstairs, where Lemon, in body, if not in spirit, hovered in the passage.

Algy sent up a message that tea was to be made, and that he himself would purchase eatables. So Lemon made tea in his pantry, and Eleanor went into the bedroom and removed her top coat and powdered her nose and pulled about the side bits of her hair.

A cheerfully masculine bedroom. Plain, serviceable furniture and accessories; nothing dainty or trifling. No pictures of the Kirchner school, or young ladies stripped to the waist in order to stroke cats ("Puss-Puss") or to eat cherries ("Cherry Ripe"). Instead, school groups—"Myself when young," Algy would say, "eagerly frequenting." Cricket gear in the corner. The pyjamas on the bed expensive silk pyjamas, but made for the sake of comfort, rather than for the sake of art. The very toothbrush on the glass ledge of the washing stand was a big, male toothbrush.

A door led direct from the bedroom to the sitting room, whither Eleanor repaired. Another eminently manly room very modern; not overfilled with furniture. A Chesterfield sofa, turned from the fireplace to a more sociable angle during the summer months—an ample sideboard for a room in which breakfast was the only meal usually partaken of. Bookcases—pipe-racks. The pictures—a drawing of the Grand National, and a portrait study of the interior of the National Sporting Club during a bout. Some Bateman proofs and some caricatures of celebrities of the sporting world and the musical comedy stage. Golf clubs lying on the top of one of the bookcases—a man's room.

Eleanor sat on the sofa, very settled in attitude, but

with just a thought of speculation in her bright eyes as they looked around her.

Too manly? Too—too cricketing? He had his common lapses, of course; she knew that. But to her in this, her mood of danger (and welcoming the danger and ready to court any trouble), would he say, "No, dash it, Eleanor—we may be pretty wild people at times, but don't lose your head, old Elly, you funny old darling." A nod from him, and she was lost, and she craved the nod just now. Full tilt. Constraint and heed were like the thunder murmuring away up there—a great way off; off the earth. Well, confound it, if she were going to be stoned, in any case, she might as well have her fling too. Convenient argument! Oh, but what mattered reasons and arguments and counter-accusations now? And resistance and pride? Full tilt and be hanged to them!

Lemon floated in and out of the room with his tea-cloth and crockery. Eleanor had learnt of his cause for anxiety from Algy in the course of casual conversation. She made inquiries in the always rather diffident tone with which the unmotherly woman approaches the subject of birth. Lemon thanked her in a hushed melancholy.

"Thank you, madam. Very patient. Her mother is with her—a knowing one, she is. To-night, if not sooner, is her forecast. It's certainly a very trying time for the husband."

When Algy came in, Lemon caught him in the passage while he was removing his mackintosh. Mrs. Krabbe had twice rung up to know whether he had arrived back yet. She requested that he would telephone her directly he came in.

"Oho!" said Algy. "How did she know I was coming back to-day? You didn't tell her, Lemon?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Ah, I see. Righto. I may ring through. Don't worry any more about that. Here, take this tea-fodder."

He entered the sitting room, and was greeted by Eleanor's brightest smile. She looked very much at home.

"Diana's been busy," he said, "wiring Auntie all about us."

"I don't mind who she wires or what she wires," said Eleanor.

"Silly little ass," said Algy, drawing a chair up to the tea table. "Well, what's the programme, old thing?"

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't mind. I shall take my luggage back home by-and-by, and dress. I've only country stuff with me. Besides, I should love Louise to find out I'm back in town, and I expect since collaring that note she's bribed my maids to hand on any information they get. Kind of thing she would do. Anyhow, then I'll join you again here, and we'll dine and dance. Oh, I'm going to get 'em guessing; I told you. If I were sure Louise knew I was back, I'd stay out all night."

"I'm blowed if I'd worry about Louise any more."

"I'm only worrying about galling her. How about your wise old aunt?"

"Poor old Auntie," said Algy. "She's generally pretty shrewd over these affairs, too."

"Is she still inclined to butt in?"

He nodded.

Eleanor stretched back complacently on the sofa.

"If she's going to keep me from enjoying myself to-night, she's got her work cut out," she said.

"Not knowing you properly," said Algy, "she very likely misjudges your range of enjoyment."

"P'raps she doesn't," replied Eleanor, not looking at him.

"What?"

"P'raps she's seen Reggy once or twice. It wouldn't take a very experienced woman to predict what'll happen to Reggy's wife in the end."

Algy glanced at her without making any comment on this. She met his eyes and smiled quickly. Lemon entered with the tea, which she welcomed with a little exclamation of gratitude. She left the sofa and took a chair beside Algy at the table. When Lemon departed, Algy made no attempt to return to the former conversation. She noticed that. She noticed, too, that her remark had not been lost on him. He was, for once, during the meal a trifle self-conscious with her, talking his nonsense with a suggestion of artificiality. A young man entertaining a girl to tea at his rooms, as it were. Not quite Algy and Elly. And it only wanted a nod from him—and——

But before they had progressed very far with their tea, there came a ring at the electric bell at the front door.

"Hallo!" said Algy. "Who's this, I wonder?"

"I don't care," said Eleanor, in the sing-song monotone in which people do not care.

"It's either Auntie or a summons for Lemon."

The ring was repeated before Lemon (and he was not slow to respond) could, by any physical possibility, make more than three yards of passage.

"It's Auntie, then," added Algy.

It was Auntie. She made no inquiries of Lemon. She came and inserted a Roman nose into the sitting room.

"M'hm," she said, as though confirming a suspicion, and advanced. She had braved the rain in a black-and-white striped georgette frock and a hat trimmed with roses. She drew after her by a leader a very miniature and tinkling Skye terrier.

"I suppose you don't mind my bringing Beckett," she said.

"He'll be quite safe," said Algy. "We have no mice. May I——?"

"And so this is Mrs. Thing," said Mrs. Krabbe, with a nod at Eleanor. "Yes, I believe I've seen you before."

As a rule Eleanor might have been rather amused by the unlikely experience of finding herself a mere impression of a former meeting, but, in her present mood, Mrs. Krabbe was asking for it.

"Yes," replied Eleanor. "And now that you've heard I'm going to the devil, I suppose you'll have to make up your mind to see me pretty frequently."

Mrs. Krabbe sat on the sofa in a manner which suggested that to do so strained her amidships, which it did. She spoke in a modulated tone of hoarse nonchalance.

"I don't care a gnat's fleabite where *you* go," she began, but Algy chimed in.

"Oh, I say, this is a nice matey little greeting. Let sisterly love continue, girls. This is not Louis Wain's Almanach, or anything of that sort."

"I've come, if you want to know, on a most friendly mission," said Mrs. Krabbe.

"Well, break the news gently," said Algy. "I didn't even have time to begin to say, 'Mrs. Krabbe—Mrs. Bingham,' before you flew at her like an angry ginger Tom and bitter end."

"To be candid with myself as well as with you," proceeded Mrs. Krabbe, addressing Eleanor, "I was rather jealous of your friendship with Algy, but he tells me it's quite a Platonic affair, so now I don't mind. You see, I rather count on his going out with me on certain evenings, and to-night happens to be one of them. And now, of course, as it's purely a Platonic business, he will be able to come out with me."

"Indeed?" said Eleanor. "Well, well. I suppose it's more difficult to remain Platonic after dark, especially in the summer time. In fact, it may be impossible. But we can let you know definitely to-morrow morning."

"To which," said Algy, "Auntie, arching her back, and twitching her whiskers, replies——?"

"You don't quite see what I'm driving at," said Mrs. Krabbe. "There'll be no competition for Algy to-night."

"I know there won't," put in Eleanor.

"Because, if you're merely a nice, kind, Platonic, married friend," went on Mrs. Krabbe, "you'll be out of that chair and on your way home directly you've finished your tea, if not sooner."

"Well, presently, yes; I know I shall. To dress for to-night."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Krabbe. "To meet your husband. He's coming back from abroad to-day."

Eleanor looked at her suddenly—startled. It was possible; that was why she jumped. It was almost

likely, if Louise had forwarded that note. But how on earth should this old woman know?

Algy pushed his cup across the table for more tea.

"Auntie, darling," he said, "you lie in your teeth, which I shouldn't do, because they must be awfully uncomfortable to lie in. I've seen them in the tumbler."

Mrs. Krabbe's reply was to crush her chin to her chest and, gazing downward, to fumble in the folds of her bosom. She, at length, produced a creased telegram, which she unfolded with a good deal of blowing at the edges. She then ferreted in her vanity bag for her eyeglass.

Have heard husband returning unexpectedly to-day—inform them if possible.

DIANA

she read, and exhibited the telegram aloft like an auctioneer.

"Diana," exclaimed Eleanor. "Where can she have heard that?"

Algy frowned in silence at the waving danger signal; then at Eleanor; then at his Aunt, who made an elaborate Gallic gesture of incomprehension.

"I don't know how she found out," she said, "but Diana wouldn't tell a lie."

"She hasn't got the brain to invent this one, anyhow; that's the point," said Algy.

Eleanor had recovered her composure and was pouring out his tea.

"Probably Diana got a wire addressed to me, and opened it——"

"A wire, who from?" said Algy.

"From her husband, I suppose," said Mrs. Krabbe, readily. "After all, if a husband comes home unexpectedly from abroad, he usually wires his wife, doesn't he?"

This was received in silence. Mrs. Krabbe rose from the sofa. "Especially," she added, casually, "when the wife is a good-natured, Platonic sort of person, who is very likely being kind to someone else while the husband isn't there for her to make a fuss of."

She retired toward the door, in a stately and deliberately sweeping movement like that of a sailing vessel, with Beckett, a small rowing boat, in tow.

"Well, I've got a taxi waiting," she said. "I'll call for you at the usual time," she added to Algy, who rose.

"No!" This was Eleanor. Mrs. Krabbe hove to and tacked. "If that news is true," said Eleanor with animation, "it decides me. I was going home before. Now I'm not."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Krabbe, musingly, "that no one in this world has had his name taken in vain more systematically than this poor devil, Plato. Whoever *he* was."

"You don't understand. My sister-in-law has been trying to make mischief about me and Algy. That's the meaning of my husband coming home. All right, then; they shall jolly well have a run for their money."

"I see," said Mrs. Krabbe. "And what does Algy stand to win?"

"If Algy wasn't keen on my society, he'd say so."

"So it's really only a bit of husband-baiting?"

"No. I'm going out with Algy, because I like going out with Algy. If my husband chooses to dash about

to and from the Continent to try and stop it, that's his concern."

"But the fact remains, that you're giving, and trying to give, the impression of being naughty, and getting all the discredit for being naughty, without actually being naughty. Well, I've heard of a few mugs' games, but I think this returns the penny."

She turned again to the doorway, but once more veered.

"And, in any case," she added, "whether that's the game or the other thing, you might show a little more consideration for Algy. I don't like to see young men spending their time in a manner calculated to rob them of their self-respect; so you'd better leave him to me. *I'm* only going to take him to a gambling hell."

"If I'm the blighter with the apple," said Algy, "Venus wins on this occasion. Sorry, Auntie."

"Am I Venus?" asked Mrs. Krabbe.

"No," said Algy.

"I thought not," said Mrs. Krabbe. "Well, if Venus's husband calls round and takes her home, I shall be going to Shady Nook at about tenish. I've ordered a car."

She departed.

Algy smiled and waved her off the premises, and returned to Eleanor.

"Poor old Auntie," he said. "She's got a good chance. By golly, though, how damned mean—all this sneaking home after you, and trying to catch you unawares. Unless I'm doing the gentleman an injustice and he's wired you at Diana's to come home, and that's how Diana found out. That may be it. But think of it, anyhow. Louise sending on that note to him. He,

instead of telling her to go to hell, as any decent husband would do, comes crawling back without a word to you. My word, poor old Elly, you *have* struck it rich. I thought you were out for a bit of fun and couldn't get any at home, but—you certainly have got some provocation if this is the sort of stuff you're up against. Of course he *may* have wired to the cottage. Still, in any case, fancy coming home on the word of a nasty sister who pinches notes in the wrong handbag. My golly, what people! I suppose Diana *didn't* get an inspiration and invent his home-coming to suit her own ends. Oh, no. That's altogether too Machiavellian for Diana. Still, who the deuce can she have heard from?"

Eleanor let him babble on, while not insensible of his more lively sympathy. She sat with her eyes fixed on the bookcase behind Algy, and her lips held in an introspective smile. After a little while, she aroused herself and returned to the sofa. Algy stretched himself, and glanced at his watch.

"I suppose you meant that—when you said you weren't going home?" he asked.

"I'm not going home to find him there," said Eleanor. "He's got to leave home to find me now."

He nodded. "And as for all that chat about me, and doing me an injustice, and all that nitrogen of Auntie's and Diana's, you needn't——"

"If I thought that was true, I *would* go home," she said.

"It isn't true," said Algy. "It isn't true—there! Only what are we going to do about your evening things? You'd better ring up for them to be sent here, or send Lemon for them."

"No. Don't you see, if it's true that Reggy's home,

it alters things. I wouldn't have minded Louise finding out that I was back in town, and in your rooms—that would have been great. But if Reggy knew, he'd come round here and spoil our fun. And I've got a very pretty evening frock with me that I took to Diana's. Not the one I wanted to wear, but never mind, it'll do. And my jewellery."

"Well, there you are then. You can dress here, of course. But he's bound to find out you're in town before long, and he'll know where to find you, so we must be prepared for him to come steaming in."

"If he does," said Eleanor, "I'll make a point of being half dressed in your bedroom at the time. But, if you ask me, I think he's much more likely to dash off down to April Cottage."

"Oh, what a glorious thought! But it looks as though Diana has let on that we're not there."

"Oh, I don't know and I don't care," cried Eleanor. "I'm not going home till I'm taken home. And home and my husband and all that aren't my first consideration at all just now."

She paused for a moment, then turned to him very earnestly.

"Algy, you know me. You know I wouldn't chuck a home where I could be happy, or a husband who was reasonably fond of me. But—oh, I don't know. I suppose I'm one of those bad characters who can only find happiness in enjoyment. I told you a lie just now, Algy."

"What?"

"I said if I didn't think it was fair to you I'd go home. I was only thinking of myself. I felt as if something said, 'You've got a chance of happiness.

You're always saying you can't get the happiness you want. Well, here you are. Don't let it go.' But it *isn't* fair to you. I know it isn't. I know in my heart it isn't. Unless you—unless you . . ."

He caught her hand quickly. She looked up, right into his eyes; not pleadingly, not enticingly, but as a woman looks at a man when they are of one mind and trying to make a decision.

"Do you mean it, Elly?" he asked.

"Do you? Do you?" she answered.

A nod and she was . . .

He nodded; so slight a nod that it was scarcely more than a smile.

"Kiss me," she said.

He kissed her.

CHAPTER XV

BURDEN ON TWO STRINGS

MURIEL, daughter of rumour, gave a sustained performance of that facial feat, which was so like the opening of a box, as she lingered in the passage of the Ring o' Bells, and happened to overhear a good deal of what Mr. Berty Pitts had to say on the telephone. She remained close to the door of the office-parlour, held by attentive and eye-contracting suspicion.

This person had been to the cottage, and was now repeating information which might refer to her stout gentleman. If so, it was hardly credible that the information was the truth. It might, of course, refer to the first, sporty, younger gent who had stayed at the Ring o' Bells the night before. If so, what of the stout one? No mention of him that Muriel could hear, and she didn't miss much.

If her stout one had been followed and spied on, and was now being lied about, Muriel decided that it would be acting dishonourably to stand there, and listen without following up this advantage by further investigations. Perhaps, if Muriel had searched her heart, she would have discovered that her prevailing prompting was a mild attack of jealousy. It could not, it could not be true that her stout one had parted from her company, only to share the bed of the cottage lady. Never! His questions had not pointed to any such

intention. It couldn't be him that this telephoning person was after telling of.

Still—she must investigate.

It so happened that, just as Muriel ceased to happen to catch what the person was saying on the telephone, Mr. Plum came into the passage from the bar. He had a letter for the evening post, and Muriel had better run along to the post office with it. Incidentally, for the first time at South Ditherton since about ten o'clock that morning, it had stopped raining.

Muriel took charge of the letter, but waited until Berty had finished his conversation before she set out. She offered to return his bicycle for him to Mrs. Leake's. He readily accepted, and, informing her that he would be at the hotel for dinner, if not for the whole night, wearily took the hint furnished by a sketch of an unproportionate hand with the nails thickly outlined in black, which pointed upward from the wall at the foot of the staircase with the legend beneath it, "To Lounge."

As a daughter of rumour, Muriel naturally knew the ropes with regard to the dissemination of local news. Mrs. Leake was not a daughter of rumour. She was the mother of rumour.

Mrs. Leake's cycle shop was next door but one to the post office, and on occasions when lack of custom made it unnecessary for her to mind her own business, she would often just pop in to see her friend, Miss Frisby, and to mind other people's. To-day, under skies depositing rain upon the earth as from a bucket, there had been no very marked activity in the world of cycling; but the same cause had prevented Mrs. Leake from undertaking a pop. Now, at last, that the rain held off, she popped in no time.

Now, Heaven defend the fair name of Miss Frisby, but no one could deny that Mrs. Leake possessed an amazing gift of divination concerning current local happenings. Particularly did this apply to matters important enough to warrant the reception or despatch of telegrams. She made no secret of her powers. Having popped into the post office and sensed the day's news, she was always willing to hand it on to the less visionary world at large. On one occasion, Miss Huddle, leaving the cycle shop with an inflated tire, had paused to congratulate old Mr. Body on the birth of a grandchild, long before the telegraph boy had stunted his red bicycle to the bewildered old gentleman's cottage.

This evening, Chool provided an unusual field for the clairvoyance of Mrs. Leake. She "obtained" a remarkable message which had been sent off much earlier in the day by Mrs. Easy to Mr. Hole. So many hours had elapsed since its sending that the spirits were naturally inclined to be a little bit vague as to detail, but the message undoubtedly attributed the most shameless conduct to the young lady who had taken over the cottage. She, herself, had been in and sent off a wire or two; the latest only half an hour or so ago. But her messages had been comparatively trivial and pointless, and were not considered to be worth Mrs. Leake's while to get into communication about.

Mrs. Leake returned to her cycle shop sorely vexed that she had not held a séance before the young man with the rabbit teeth had called and hired his bicycle to go to the cottage. He must be in it, whatever it was. Was he the lover expected? He had no luggage, but perhaps he had sent that in advance. Probably this evening, he had said, he would return the bicycle. That

didn't sound like a very thorough—er—well, visit.

Just inside the cycle shop she found Muriel with the bicycle. With a regal beam of welcome she bundled the girl into her private room, and sat her down. There, head to head, they exchanged their respective solid facts and electro-biology.

"She wer' in the town half an hour ago?" exclaimed Muriel, presently. "Oh, but that can't well be, Mrs. Leake. Not if what he said on that ther' 'phoon wer' the truth. She'd never have had the time. It can't be her he spoke of."

"There was another woman come to the cottage yesterday," returned Mrs. Leake. "It was driving back from driving her there that young Pawley drove into the War Memorium."

"Ah, I toold you, Mrs. Leake. That wer' the one that the sporty one drove back to the hotel this morrnin'. And then, this new one say on the 'phoon that ther' was oonly the two at the cottage in bed, with another that I take him to mean to be Mrs. Easy also ther'; but not in with 'em."

Mrs. Leake screwed her face into an expression suggestive of necromancy, but was much too far from the post office to hope to get any definite results.

"This new one's lying, and that's my opinion," said Muriel, not without heat. "And if she wer' in the town oonly half an hour ago, that proves it. And no one ain't got no right for to poke their noses and tell lies about it over so nice a gent as the fatty one I spoke of. I have a mind to see further into it, I have. Mrs. Leake, if I could get leave for to go out for a while to-night, would you lend me a bicycle?"

"You shall have the Sunbeam," said Mrs. Leake,

"the Sunbeam, you shall have. Only mind you bring it back directly you've heard what's what. You may take it with you now."

"Thank you," said Muriel. "If I can manage, I shall get out to Chool, and speak to Mrs. Easy. I'll take it in a minute, Mrs. Leake. I've just got a letter to poost."

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Leake. "If you see Miss Frisby, you needn't go telling her that I've told you I know what was in Mrs. Easy's telegram. I like to have facts cut and dried before I make mention of things. Otherwise it's mere gossip, which I dislike and will never consent to be a party to it."

Out at Chool, Mrs. Easy heard the sound of prodigious motoring, and ran to her cottage door. She caught sight of the vehicle as it thumped away in an easterly direction. Pitcher's van! But why on the Chool Road? She knew where the van was bound for—Marchant's farm. Mrs. Marchant had bought some things at an auction, and was expecting delivery. But Marchant's farm was on the upper main road. Did this mean more luxuries from Pitcher's for April Cottage? H'm. If so, a nice condition the occupants would have been in to receive them.

Mrs. Easy's attention was distracted from the problem of Pitcher's van by little Easy, who had been unable to resist the undoubtedly pressing temptation of venturing into the road and indulging in the priceless sport of puddle-kicking. Mrs. Easy regained him, gave him one for himself, and put him to bed to avoid the trouble of changing his footgear.

But even as the steam from the sodden vale arose with

the evening and floated before the portals of April Cottage, so from the mind of Mrs. Easy there continued to arise and float in the same direction the mists of sullen conjecture and still inquisitive derision. Already, perhaps, Mr. Hole would have received the detective's report. Oh, if only the orgy might in blissful ignorance be continued until the devastating old gentleman himself arrived like a cleansing sheet of flame to purge his corrupted premises! And oh, that Mrs. Easy might be there to see!

All the way from Harrogate to Peterborough, and from Peterborough to London, the mind of the avenger himself kept returning to this scarcely conceivable behaviour on the part of his one trusted niece. It only proved what he had always contended—that there was not one woman in the world, not one, from Cæsar's wife downward, who was really above suspicion. Most people who express themselves chiefly in superlatives are poseurs; and the most bigoted poseur is the one who relies, for preference, upon his own company. Deep in the heart of old Mr. Hole there was a little tender spot for our Diana.

But either she or Mrs. Easy was up to mischief. And mischief at April Cottage—it was only a question of how quickly he could get there. Two or three times in the course of his journey he worried, like a terrier at a hole, at his pockets, and re-read Mrs. Easy's telegram. A young man—a double bed—wine? Diana? incredible! By all the bachelors of threescore, if Mrs. Easy had lied . . . The official promenading the train for tickets discovered Mr. Hole in the act of imagining what might happen to Mrs. Easy if she had

lied, and told the guard he had better have an eye to him from time to time.

This of Diana! Incredible! He might have believed it readily enough of any other woman—But Diana . . .

Wait! This blasted train got to London at what time? Seven-ten. The Bristol train left Paddington at eight. Fifty minutes. He must wire for a car to meet him at Bristol to drive him to Chool. Apart from sending the wire, he would have ample time, provided the confounded train was punctual, to make any investigations that might assist him to form a definite idea of what was going on at April Cottage. That young fool, Diana's brother, lived within calling distance. He might know something. What was his address? Ah, that could be discovered from a telephone directory. Even if it were true, and Diana were up to some inconceivable mischief at the cottage, it would be too late for her brother to issue a warning. On the other hand, some gleam of enlightenment might be forthcoming, even from so utter a young beetlehead as this Algy. Yes; he'd call at his rooms.

From London to South Ditherton was already coursing that magnificent car which had been bought to gratify Eleanor. It was progressing along the slippery roads at a pace too fast to please Louise, who had forgotten, in the haste of departure, to bring any Busby's Nerve Pills, of which it looked as if she might require a good many by the time she got home again. The pace of the car was, however, too cautious for Reginald, who shifted impatiently in his seat every time it unavoid-

ably slackened. His passion had given place to a dour, heavy, glaring churlishness.

Between little jerks and gasps of apprehension for her safety, Louise gave him a detailed and somewhat self-defensive account of what had occurred in his absence. He commented but little, and then, for the most part, in muttered apostrophe:

"Common rampant intrigue! This goat; I'll settle his hash. Shameless, scheming skit—by Christopher—we shall see!"

Only when Louise unwisely overdid the self-justification did he flare once more into open rage.

"Blame you! Of course I blame you. Undoubtedly I put her under your charge, didn't I? Not out of your sight, I said. And here's the sequel. Not your fault, indeed—you gull! You'd better stop that."

"I don't know how you imagine I was going to keep her in sight, while I sat in a dentist's chair. . . ."

"That'll do. If you think I'm in the mood for pantaloonery, you'd better think twice."

"You're in a very disagreeable mood, anyhow," said Louise.

"Thank you," said Reginald. "If you came with me, expecting to hear me give a Christy minstrel entertainment on the way down to this cottage, I'm afraid you'll be very disappointed."

She made bold, however, to insist on their halting for food by-and-by. He, frowning at his watch and blowing through his nose, consented. Truth to tell, he was very spent. For a record of the meal one should apply to a certain whiskered waiter at a roadside hotel, to whom its details will ever remain graven upon the memory.

Their far objective, the Ring o' Bells at South Ditherton, pursued the even tenor of its evening way, untroubled by the impending visitation. Apart from the taproom, from which there came, like the sound of the sea on shingle, the continuous vibration of Somersetshire debate, the hotel had only one visitor. The lounge was not rich in comfort or interest, especially when the occupant is condemned to remain therein for several hours, at the end of which time the change from monotony will probably be even more unpleasant than the monotony itself. Berty found little pleasure in sitting and gazing at a stuffed owl in a glass case on the mantelpiece and a brilliantly coloured portrait of Queen Victoria above it. He noticed that it had stopped raining, but was too weary to undertake further exercise. Fortunately, the lounge contained one or two books—some the property of the hotel, others evidently left behind by vanished patrons. The former were almost entirely religious, which, as we know, was extremely appropriate of them, in Berty's case. At the foot of the bookcase, however, between "Stepping-stones to Grace" and "The Heaven of the Heart," he discovered a coverless and derelict copy of "The Confessions of Maria Monk," and resought the hard horsehair of the lounge sofa, a trifle uplifted in spirit.

"Are you better?" asked Diana, looking in at the bedroom on her return.

Henry turned a sleepy smile in her direction.

"Oh, much better. You know, I don't think I've really broken anything. I think it's just a sprain. Is the doctor coming?"

"I hope so." Diana crossed instinctively to the

dressing-table and had a look at herself. Then she came back to the bed, sat and recounted the episode of Wotan. "But I told the old driver to call at the doctor's again to make sure," she concluded. "So he's sure to come along soon. I think I'll wait and let him come before I start on the parlour. Besides, I haven't had any tea yet, nor have you."

"I've managed without tea," he said. "I never knew I could drink so much brandy without showing it. But if you want tea, bring it up here and talk to me while you drink it. It's seemed a long, long time since you went away."

"Well, I won't leave you again. I think I'll do without tea; it's so late. I shall have to light the kitchen fire, and get some dinner ready soon."

"I'd rather have your company than your cooking," he said. "I've missed you, you know. Did you get wet?"

"Oh, I'm dry again by this time," said Diana.

"Well, anyhow, I insist on your resting a little before dashing off into further domesticity. You can talk to me till the doctor comes."

So she sat and talked with him, and once having commenced to sit and talk, sat and talked on for an unconsciously long time. He told her of his life in the East, of his many strange experiences and acquaintances. And, between the lines, he told her of his philosophical and charitable nature, of his readiness to understand and to help any one who needed help, from an Eleanor to a little Easy. He did not appear to regard his willingness to assist his fellow-creatures as a virtue. He sighed over his reminiscences, as though such a trait had always been a weakness, and certainly a very great handicap. But in that hour he won Diana's heart;

though, when at last she roused herself and went down to the kitchen, he lay and wondered fearfully whether he had bored her.

Meanwhile, what of the doctor?

Pitcher's driver, having delivered the goods bought at auction by Mrs. Marchant (Mrs. Easy was quite right), laboured back to South Ditherton and garaged the van. Pitcher's being closed by this time, he proceeded on foot to the doctor's and braved the canine citadel. He gained the front door in safety, and the cook, having by this time returned from the roof-mender's, interrogated him through a crack of the same, while keeping one or two dogs at bay in the hall with her feet.

"'E be wanted," said the driver, "out at April Cottage o' Chool. The leddy ther' inform me that the gent ther' 'as hurrt his foot severe. She say she's bin 'ere once a'ready."

The cook shook her head.

"Not to my knowledge. The doctor 'as been in and gorrn again. He had an important call to go off to Filcombe."

The driver removed his cap and scratched his head with the hand that held it.

"Wull, all I can say is, when 'e coom back, tell he."

"Very good, then," said the cook. "You'd better move off. I can't hold this dog back much longer."

Diana lit her fire and did her cooking. The labour seemed light enough now, even to one who had had an arduous day and no tea. She took the meal upstairs, and they had their dinner together. Henry, though still in severe pain, was unable to recollect any meal so near his heart's desire.

Many hours of the long June daylight yet remained; but already, beneath the heavy skies, the spirit of evening seemed to hover over the valley. Diana's remaining duties threatened to outlast the daylight. She had to wash up the dinner things, to receive the doctor, possibly to arrange to receive and administer whatever the doctor prescribed for the foot, to clean out the parlour, and, for the second night in succession, to prepare her own bed in the parlour chair. But she didn't hurry away from the bedroom after dinner. Together they sat and talked on, and Henry, having now satisfied himself definitely that she was not bored, became quite open about the extraordinary attraction which he found in her.

She did not gainsay him; and when she was alone again in her kitchen-scullery, she found herself paying small heed to the washing up.

"If Eleanor only loved Algy," she thought, "really *loved* him—would I have blamed her? Blamed her? I'd have helped her. No, I wouldn't; not this morning. But this evening I might have.

"If this man—this darling man—were married and unhappy, wouldn't I chuck all my principles and love him? No. I know what it is. You don't have to chuck your principles to get happiness; because, if you stick to your principles, happiness will come along all right one day."

She began to sing over her washing up. Henry heard her, and smiled in the throes of a foot-spasm. But Diana scarcely heard herself; was scarcely aware that she was singing.

Look here, upon this picture, and on this. Our Diana progressing through life down the middle of the

road; a nice girl, dull in the opinion of many. Uninitiated until now in the universal theories of love and romance, but constant to their cause. And here is at last the one proverbial man, like a modern Lohengrin amazingly consummated, borne suddenly into her life and established, apparently more or less permanently, but without a hint of dishonour, in her bedroom.

Our Eleanor, dancing down the side of the road; a delightful girl, bright in the opinion of all. A cheerful infidel regarding the theories of love and romance. With no partner established in her bedroom, but herself surrendering to the first partner to hand and gaily established in his.

Even by their consorts you may know them—the orthodox, big-hearted Henry; the pleasurable, unstable Algy. And by their prosecutors—the one descending in the stern discipline of the uncle; the other in the jealous vengeance of the husband. True, both are at the moment consuming hot miles of pursuit toward the two places respectively occupied by each other's quarry; but this is Puck's contribution to our June day's work.

Diana—losing count of her plates, washing one twice, another not at all. Singing almost unconsciously, her pure heart full of this new and wonderful emotion of a happiness long dreamt-of, now rapturously fulfilled.

Eleanor—with one hand through the door of a young man's bedroom in the midst of her laughing toilet, and with the lips of the young man to the hand in the sitting room.

Chool and Piccadilly. Two women. The only two there are.

END OF PART II

PART III

NIGHT OF MISCHIEF

CHAPTER XVI

PEREGRINATIONS OF AN UNWANTED MAN

BR-RR-RR—the electric bell of Algy's rooms, and the heart of Lemon leapt. He was just going to nip round home in any case, to see how things were going. But here was crisis brought to him.

He hurried to the door and presented a white face to the purple ditto of Mr. Hole, whom Harrogate had failed to restore to a state of health conducive to stair-climbing.

"Is this where young Mr. Gascoyne lives?"

"Yes, sir," said Lemon.

"Is he here now?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Hole growled like a dog.

"He's jest this minute gone out to dinner," said Lemon.

"What do you mean by just this minute?"

"Well, about five minutes ago, sir."

"Then what the hell do you mean by saying just this minute? You don't say 'My grandmother's cat is just this minute having kittens under my bed last Tuesday,' do yer?"

"No, sir——"

"No. However—he is in London?"

"Yes, sir."

"'M. You know who I am?"

"No, sir."

"No. Well, I'm Mr. Hole."

"Mr. ——?"

"Mr. Hole. Mister—mister—Hole—Hole. Mr. Hole. His uncle."

"Oh. Yes, sir."

"Oh, yes. Now, look you here, do you know anything about April Cottage?"

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"Oh, my patience! Do—do—you—you——?"

"No, sir; I don't," said Lemon.

"You know nothing about April Cottage?"

"No, sir."

"You don't know who is there?"

"No, sir."

"You know that my niece, Mr. Gascoyne's sister, is there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why did you say——?"

"Oh, I didn't——"

"You did."

"Yes, sir—but—apart from Miss Richardson Gascoyne being there, I don't know anything about it."

Mr. Hole lowered his head, and fixed Lemon with a dreadful eye. He then consulted his watch.

"Oh, well," he muttered, turning resignedly. "I'm not surprised to hear that you don't. From the look of you I should think you know sweet salvation nothing about any damned thing on earth."

Lemon was only too pleased to allow this disgruntled old gentleman to express any opinion of his capabilities he chose, so long as he cleared out. Quite enough to contend with apart from him. He felt instinctively that it would be courting trouble to admit that young

Mr. Richardson Gascoyne had returned from April Cottage that very afternoon, bringing with him another gentleman's wife. Better far to be called a fool and see the Uncle stumping away baffled down the staircase.

Quite enough to contend with. His young master had openly hinted that there was a possibility of the gentleman the lady belonged to arriving upon the scene. Mrs. Krabbe, persistent in her inquisitions, would be certain to blow in again before long. Before long, too, unless he himself plucked up courage to creep round home and whisper awed inquiries of his mother-in-law, might come the boy from the mews below home, breathless in unnerving report.

So Lemon took a melancholy bowler hat and left the rooms. Just outside the house he encountered Denise, the maid of Mrs. Krabbe, who assailed him like a hurricane. Madame was still uncertain as to whether she was to look for escort that night. Was Mr. Gascoyne now at liberty? Oh, what, Mr. Lemon, was this affair? Never before had Madame and Mr. Gascoyne had a how-do-you-say tiff. She had been sent to obtain definite information regarding the operations of Mr. Gascoyne. There was, Denise understood, another lady in the case; but by this time Madame was of the opinion that the other lady would have discovered that her goose had been cooked, to use the droll phrase of Madame.

"Well, if you take my advice, though don't say I said so," replied Lemon, "you'll tell the old lady that 'e's already gone out to dinner and is best left to his own intentions. So she'd best not send, call, nor 'phone any more to-night."

Denise performed semaphore in Half Moon Street.

"'Ere, don't start that," said Lemon. "People will think we're having words. You'd best run back and say there's no one in the rooms, and that's all you know. I've troubles enough of my own without none of yours."

He went his way, peering anxiously ahead when he got to the corner, as though he half expected to see an open-air crèche set out in the middle of Curzon Street.

At the Marble Arch end of Park Lane the road was up. Mr. Hole's taxi found itself, toward the conclusion of the rush hour, wedged three quarters of the way down one of the longest queues of traffic that had ever been seen in that vicinity. Mr. Hole extended his head through the window.

"Why didn't you go through the Park?"

The taxi-driver gradually inclined his ear.

"Eh?"

"Why—why—didn't—didn't——?"

"I didn't know the road was up."

"Of course it's up. Any fool could have told you that. Busiest time of the year, isn't it? No earthly reason for the road to be up, is there? No, then very well—up it goes. I've kept as clear of this blasted city all my life as I can, but I've learnt that much. And when they've got it down again they'll wait for another really busy season and then tar it. And if you don't get me to Paddington in time to catch the eight o'clock train, by Satan, I'll tar *you*."

Outrageous state of affairs! He had wasted valuable time in going all the way to that young booby's flat to interview a gaping and futile manservant. He had yet to send off a wire to Bristol for a car to meet him—good God! and it wouldn't be delivered now if he did send it.

All he could do to catch the train, in any case. This mile of stinking motor 'buses! In maddening, jerking stages he progressed, finally to gain the foremost place in the queue and be held up by the fool policeman on duty, who seemed neither to know the urgency of Mr. Hole's case, nor to be able to grasp it when informed.

By the time he reached Paddington Mr. Hole was halfway through the window of the taxi, and shouting at any other vehicle or individual that appeared likely to thwart his progress. The big hand of the clock which faces the drive down to the station was quivering at the hour.

The name of Lemon's mother-in-law was Mrs. Frush. Like serpents, such ladies may generally be classified with either the large, ponderous squashers or the nimble, poisonous stingers. Mrs. Frush was a squasher.

Lemon found her in his living room with an elbow on the table, reading the account of a murder in the evening paper. She exhibited a contented and confident inaction which drove the mild man almost to tears of rebuke. Mrs. Lemon was in her room, into which he thrust an expression of terror-stricken inquiry.

"It isn't yet, Stan," she murmured. "You shall be sent for."

Lemon returned to Mrs. Frush in awful, confidential challenge.

"'Ere," he said. "Is this all right?"

Mrs. Frush took a brief reinforcement of stout.

"'Usbands!" she soliloquized. "Always the same the first time."

"Well, when——?"

"It hasn't started, not proper yet. In about a couple of hours I shall look for it to be going nice. And the

sooner the least seen of you, believe me, the better. I 'ave midwifed a dozen, to say nothink of bearing me own. You'd better get back to your valliting. You shall be let known."

Ten minutes later Lemon was again holding his despondent head in his pantry.

The thunderstorm, moving in a sulky circle, had returned to London. Its ominous rumble could be heard in the far distance and at long intervals. The air was oppressive and very still.

Lemon presently held an inspection of his master's bedroom. Here was an ample opportunity for valliting. Both Eleanor and Algy had dressed therein in turn, and apparently in the carnival spirit in which one casts aside one's garments like cares and dons one's festival array. The bedroom was about as tidy as the bedroom of a couple of children who have just undressed for sea-bathing.

Lemon hesitated, however, to tidy the bedroom. So pointed a reminder of his chaperonage might be tactless. Shortly after he had cleared away the tea, he had been instructed to reclaim Mrs. Bingham's luggage from Dawkins, the hall-porter, and he himself had assisted Algy to carry the portmanteau into the bedroom, where now it lay, open and ransacked. But there had been something in his master's manner which had suggested that Lemon had better consider himself, metaphorically, blindfolded during the portmanteau-to-bedroom carrying episode. "No," reflected Lemon. "I think this here bedroom had better remain a closed book to me." The sitting room was different. He removed the glasses and replaced the cocktail-shaker in the sideboard cupboard.

They dined at the Savoy. Never before had Eleanor looked so bewitched with pleasure. The evening costume designed for wear at Chool may have been a secondary effort, but would have supplied the cows and chickens with an experience very novel in the realm of Mr. Hole; a beautifully modelled gown of delphinium-blue. Her pearl drop-earrings. And eyes that seemed to catch the lights and to shine back their revelry into Algy's. Which spake again.

If during tea they had not been quite Eleanor and Algy, they were not the old Eleanor and Algy now. Not so much easy conversation. None of Algy's precocities; and as for her, who would have believed that she had been restlessly awake in the early hours of this very morning in the megrims of discontent? Eagerly contented now. Her eyes were on his nearly all the time, laughing into his, but half hidden by her long lashes. So peeps an expectant girl through her curtained window to greet her lover.

The band discoursed appropriately; not swaying, yearning strains, but the mettlesome infection of ragtime. Champagne went with this and went well; a clever vintage with just an added hint of frivolity in its bouquet. Moët.

They sat there until after nine o'clock, held by the transcendent fascination of the near future.

"What shall we do now?" said Algy. "Stay here? Go on somewhere? It's still broad daylight. Somehow it seems too early to go to Ciro's yet. If we go there at all. Shall we pop round to the rooms and see whether there's any news and then go on somewhere?"

"All right," said Eleanor. "But I don't care whether there's any news or not."

"I expect Lemon will be knocking around. I'll push him off and tell him he'd better stay at home to-morrow morning in the midst of his anxieties. Considerate, what? Besides, though as you say we don't care, it would be interesting to hear whether there have been any inquiries for you."

"It's going to thunder and rain again," said Eleanor, as they got into a taxi.

"That doesn't matter," said Algy.

"Nothing matters," she said, sitting erect and looking straight in front of her, but stretching a hand out to him. "Nothing matters."

Lemon heard the sound of Algy's key in the front door with a gape of apprehension. Back already? What was the etiquette of menservants in such a situation? Graceful and unbidden retirement? Or should he wait and put his master and himself to the embarrassment of respectively slinging and being slung from the scene?

Algy relieved his doubts—very tactfully, Lemon thought.

"Hallo, you still here, Lemon? Oh, well, Mrs. Bingham and I are going out to dance directly; and we shall be late back, so, of course, you needn't stay. By the way, has anybody called here?"

"Your uncle, sir."

"What!"

"Yes, sir. Soon after you'd gone."

"My uncle? Are you sure?"

"He said so, sir. An elderly gentleman. Rather a—well, a trifle abrupt, sir."

"That's he. But in London? What did he want?"

"He seemed to think there was something going on amiss at April Cottage, sir."

"What! Who had he heard from?"

"I don't know, sir. But I think he's gone down there. Dawkins told me he had a taxi with luggage and told the man to drive to Paddington."

Algy followed Eleanor into the sitting room.

"You hear this? Uncle has been putting his ear to the ground too. Goodness knows how he discovered that we'd been using his cottage as a trysting-depot. We appear to be in the grip of the hidden hand. Anyhow, he's hiked off. There's that to be thankful for."

"Strikes me that he'll walk into his cottage to-night and discover your sister entertaining my husband," said Eleanor.

"By golly, it's Reggy's Waterloo, if he does," predicted Algy. "But how can this old man have smelt out trouble at the cottage? Tell me that."

"Who knew his address?"

"Only Diana."

"Well, there you are."

"You don't mean to say that Diana has actually tried to rope in Uncle to stop us meeting?"

"I don't see why not. All the other members of both our families seem to be at the game. Perhaps Diana thought it was a shame that poor old Uncle should be left out."

"Well, they've dished it up between them anyhow," said Algy, returning to the passage. "Lemon! Nobody else called?"

"Mrs. Krabbe's maid, sir. I understand Mrs. Krabbe still hopes that you may be able to go with her to-night. But I took the liberty of informing the maid that I thought most decidedly not, sir."

"Oh, poor old lady," sighed Algy. "I'm afraid she's

rather upset with me for once. She's perfectly certain to call in again herself. In fact, she said she would, at about ten. I think we'd better be out of the way by then. I tell you what, Lemon. You might wait here till she's called; and tell her that I have gone out dancing, and that I shan't be back till—oh—the early hours of the morning."

"Very well, sir."

"And then you can be off, if you like, Lemon. There'll be no need for you to be here. I shall be very late, and I can manage Mrs. Bingham's luggage for her. And I expect there'll be plenty for you to do at home, so you needn't hurry here in the morning. I'll see to my own breakfast. Right you are then. Good luck, Lemon."

He turned again to the sitting room.

"I forgot," he said. "Auntie will be poking her nose in here again at any moment. We don't want any more fur flying. I think we'd better push off again right away."

He glanced out into the passage. Lemon had retired to the pantry.

"Shall we?" he added. "Just for a bit? The night is yet young. In fact, it hasn't started yet."

She assented with a shrug and a smile.

"All right," she said. "Just for a bit."

"Is Dawkins down there, Lemon?" called Algy.

"I don't know, sir. Shall I call you a taxi, sir?"

"Yes, please."

They followed Lemon down. He was rather a long time getting the taxi, but at length as they waited in the doorway of the house a car drove up outside and they moved instinctively forward. The face of Mrs.

Krabbe peered at them from the interior of a hired limousine.

"Well?" she inquired through the open window. "Was the telegram true?"

"I don't know," said Eleanor.

"You needn't have called, Auntie, dear," said Algy. "I told you I was going dancing. Later on, when we've finished dancing, she'll be going home; so she'll be able to let you know to-morrow whether the telegram was true or not, if you're really as curious as all that."

"Well, I call it very foolish tactics, that's all, and whatever you're up to," said Mrs. Krabbe. "When my husband went abroad there was no knowing what I did. But I was always on the mat when he got home."

"We're going to Ciro's," said Eleanor. "Perhaps he'll be there. He was last time."

"H'm. Well, you know where *I'm* going," said Mrs. Krabbe.

"Yes," replied Algy, with a turn of the eye at the immobile driver. "I hope you'll have a very pleasant soirée. My kind regards to the vicar."

At this moment Lemon arrived, clinging to a taxi. It pulled up in front of Mrs. Krabbe's car, and they got in.

"Ciro's," called Algy. "It's all right now, Lemon. Good-night, Auntie."

The taxi frisked away, the limousine gliding condescendingly in its wake. Lemon plodded upstairs again for his bowler hat. The thunder was still rumbling in the distance.

"You again!" exclaimed Mrs. Frush. "I thought I told you to keep away until such time as you were told.

There's the boy from the mews waiting to be sent for you directly we can do with you in 'ere."

"'As it started?" moaned Lemon.

"Yes, it 'as."

"Well—Lord love us—how long does it take?"

"Sometimes forty-eight hours, and sometimes less," replied Mrs. Frush, with relish. She propelled Lemon firmly by the waistcoat until he was out of range of his own doorway. "You won't 'ear nothing yet. In two hours' time you may call back again; just in case things are quicker than what I foresee."

Lemon descended and for an hour roamed the streets like one in a dream, scarce noticing where he went; his hands thrust in his trousers pockets; his pathetic bowler on the back of his head. The thunder intermittently growled, but toward the conclusion of the hour its sound increased in volume. Lightning flashed forth, and upon the bowler hat drummed the first heavy, hot spots of the rain.

At this moment (he had been wandering in an unconscious circle) he found himself in Half Moon Street. Oh, well; if they weren't going to be back till two he might as well go up and wait in his pantry for the next hour. He dare not brave Mrs. Frush before the stipulated time-limit. And to go back and hang about in the mews seemed somehow harrowing. Almost within sound—no, no.

The street door was locked, but Lemon had his key. Wiping his bowler with his coat sleeve he once more climbed the weary stairs. He unlocked the door of the flat and turned to close it. Suddenly he paused and shot his head round toward the sitting room. Someone there! They were back again. He was wanted

little enough anywhere that night, it seemed; but nowhere less than here.

Then he heard his name called quickly, agitatedly: "Lemon! Lemon!"

He swung the front door to, and hastened to the sitting room.

CHAPTER XVII

DOORS

THE doctor, whom Diana ushered into the bedroom of April Cottage at about nine o'clock, proved to be rather a jolly soul.

"I'm very, very sorry to have kept you waiting so long," he said. "I've been searching the wrong place for a man who wasn't there with an arm he hadn't broken. Comic affair."

"Oh, intensely humorous," said Henry.

The doctor inspected the crêpe-de-Chine nightgown with some interest.

"Going to a fancy-dress ball when it happened?" he inquired.

"I may tell you I came here with no luggage, no overcoat, no umbrella, and in Pillbutton's hackney," replied Henry.

"The bedclothes hadn't been properly aired, in any case," added Diana. "But I didn't think we need *insist* on his catching pneumonia. So I lent him a nightgown."

"Ah, I see," said the doctor. "A bit tight across the shoulders, but any port in a storm."

"And while discussing trivialities," said Henry, "I have, in bed with me, what a few hours ago was a foot."

"I suppose I'd better go," said Diana.

"Certainly not," said Henry. "I shall want you to stand by and hold my hand. I know what this medi-

cal research work is. I'm not quite sure about the limitations of the nightgown, but you can untuck the bedclothes at the foot of the bed and work upward."

She gently exposed the foot; then stood beside Henry and held his hand like a child's. The doctor stooped to his inquisition, and the grip on her hand tightened, and hers in response.

"Hum!" said the doctor. "What on earth have you been trying to kick?"

"Earth itself," replied Henry. "I took a flying leap from heaven and punted the globe."

"He went on the roof to put a chimney out," said Diana.

"He's put out more than a chimney," said the doctor.

"I told you so," said Henry. "He's going to put it in again. Hold tight."

"Is the ankle broken?" asked Diana.

"It's out of joint, and the little toe's out of joint, and muscles and ligaments—I wish I'd known about this before. I'd have had you taken to the Cottage Hospital at Downblotton. As it is—I've only my two-seater. I don't think we could manage very easily. Pawley's motor has crashed. I don't quite——"

"His clothes are still wet," said Diana.

"And if," concluded Henry, "you think that I am going to be driven half across Somerset on a wet evening in a crêpe-de-Chine nightgown by Pete in Pillbutton's hackney, I don't."

"Then I suppose the only thing to do is to try and fix you up for the night and leave you where you are."

"Of course," said Diana.

"Well, I'll be as gentle as I can. Hang on to something."

Diana, without hesitation, drew nearer and put her arm round his shoulders. He clung to her in a close embrace, clung as a martyr, racked by the pains of hell, clings to the faith of heaven.

"What's this gentleman's name?" asked the doctor of Diana, as she conducted him downstairs again.

"Mr. Bingham," she told him.

"Oh, erm—you're all right here? I mean—you can manage and that sort of thing?"

"Oh, rather," said Diana.

"That's all right then," said the doctor, quickly. "Only I understand you didn't expect to have to put him up here, and I'll make arrangements to have him shifted to-morrow morning, if you like."

"I suppose you advise it?"

"Oh, yes; unquestionably. I wouldn't have left him here to-night; only I know what the Downblotton ambulance is. It would probably be to-morrow, in any case, before it arrived on the scene. I'll have it sent for first thing; and I'll come and look you up in good time. I suppose I'd better bring one or two pairs of pyjamas along, hadn't I?"

"Thanks," said Diana. "I went into South Ditherton myself this evening, but I never thought of the pyjamas. I had other things to worry about. And really I don't think that a doctor ought to keep Wotan."

The doctor sighed.

"I'd already insisted on his being got rid of," he said, "only at the last moment he scared the life out of a rate-collector. So I reprieved him until after next quarter-day."

He went out to his car, and Diana back to the bedroom to acquaint Henry with the distressing prospect of the Downblotton ambulance.

"Of course," he said. "That's quite right. I can't stay here indefinitely. But the moment I can put foot to ground I shall come and see you again."

"I may not be here then," said Diana.

"Wherever you are," said Henry.

She laughed. "Well—are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

"Have you had some more brandy?"

"Yes."

"I've got to go and clear up the parlour now."

"Oh, don't run away."

"I must. The room's like a coal-yard and I've got to sleep there."

Henry reached out for the open manuscript of Hole on "Woman" and harangued her from its pages:

"In the wisely-ordered *ménage* of the Orient the woman presents her society to her lord only at the latter's express desire; but so long as he displays partiality for her consociation, at his side she will spontaneously remain. This is her first commandment. No other delight is she permitted to esteem as commensurate with this duty; no other duty as commensurate with this delight.

"There!" said Henry. "What have you got to say to that?"

"I think it's absolute tosh," said Diana

"Well, I don't," said Henry.

Berty Pitts did not obtain his dinner at the Ring o' Bells until well after eight o'clock, and even then it was not so rich in luscious viands as a student of the window-inscription might have anticipated. Muriel served him

in a manner very different from that displayed for Henry's lunch. She developed a chronic sniff, which was particularly noticeable during the handing of dishes. She originated no conversation. Her mistrust of her client appeared to deepen with the slow setting of the sun.

Berty himself was not communicative. He ate sparingly of a stew which might well have been the sequel to the death of a local goat, followed by Spotted Dick, according to Muriel's blunt reply to what was, after all, a very reasonable question. After having eaten this as a child eats raspberry jam, suspecting Gregory Powder, he inquired pessimistically whether there was anything going on in South Ditherton. The reply was in the negative. It appeared that there was dancing on the green on the night of the annual Flower Show, and a demonstration of local musical talent every Boxing-night; but that the present was neither of the occasions in question.

Berty turned again dully to the lounge, and Muriel, having bustled through such duties as lay before her, sought Mr. Plum.

"Be it all right for me to go out for a while, Mr. Plum?"

"Wull, I dunno," replied Mr. Plum. "That dinner for one—be he a-goin' to bide?"

"He don't seem to know," said Muriel. "But if he be, I'll be back for to make his bed."

"You'd best make her now," said Mr. Plum. "If he wait all the even' in the lounge a-uncerr'n as to whether or no he be a-goin' to bide, it seem best for me to provide for he to bide. You'd best make her now."

More delay thus. It was nearly half-past nine before

Muriel mounted the Sunbeam. Judiciously she went first to Mrs. Leake and equipped herself with a lamp.

She found Mrs. Leake in a state of intensified curiosity. She had held Miss Frisby in conversation as the latter left the post office, and had achieved a belated vision of a further telegram (now the spirits came to think of it) received that morning and addressed to Miss Gascoyne. Something about someone stopping someone else from carrying on with somebody—the manifestations were very hazy. All additional reason though for Muriel to hurry up and get out to see Mrs. Easy, and to restore the Sunbeam first thing on her return.

By the time Muriel finally set out the doctor was back in South Ditherton. And less than a minute after she had turned the corner and parted company from the main road, there came pounding along the latter, on the last lap of its greedy course, the magnificent if mud-stained chariot of wrath, in which, sitting forward with an eye for every building, his lips moving in some inarticulate and hypothetical hymn of hate, came down the Assyrian like a wolf on the quiet fold of the Ring o' Bells.

It splashed into South Ditherton. "Halt!" bellowed Reginald, in a voice which rang round the market square and shook the War Memorial. "This is the place. Toot; go on—blow your hooter. Wake 'em up. By Christopher, I'll jolt these people."

"Don't frighten them, Reggy," protested Louise. "It isn't their fault. Besides, you don't want it to get about that you're here."

He paused on the step of the car and turned to forefinger an ultimatum to her.

"From now onward the less you talk the better. Understand that. Especially if you're going to talk toshpail."

Mr. Plum's ripe complexion was by this time adorning the entrance to the hotel. Reginald crossed the courtyard in a manner which caused him to withdraw a pace or two and to grasp the inner handle of the door.

From Reginald's nose the forefinger shot forth at Mr. Plum.

"You! Are you the landlord?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" asked Mr. Plum, cautiously.

"Are you, I say?"

"Ay."

"Yes. You. Are you?"

"Ay."

"Yes, you. Are you the landlord?"

"Ay."

Reginald smote the ledge of the porch with his clenched fist.

"Stop that Mic and Mac. I won't have it. Are you the landlord?"

"I told you so fowerr times," said Mr. Plum. "Ay, ay, ay, ay."

"Ho," said Reginald. "Well, you needn't think I've come here to hold a conversation with a sailor. Now then! There is a young man waiting at this hotel for me to arrive. Kindly send him to me."

Mr. Plum cogitated for a brief while behind his half-closed door. There could be scarcely any question that the new visitor intended to dot, if not to murder, the dinner for one. He could not countenance assault in the precincts of the Ring o' Bells. He himself had

occasionally dotted a drunk in the taproom; but that was different.

"Come!" cried Reginald. "Stop that shuttling. Go and bring him along, or, by thunder, I'll come and fetch him."

Mr. Plum's indecision was somewhat relieved at this point by the sudden appearance of a bosom, which thrust itself into the aperture of the doorway.

"I will find him," said the bosom. "You stay here, or just inside somewhere."

Both parties accepted this intervention. Mr. Plum directed Louise to the lounge and Reginald to the dining room. Berty Pitts, warned by the hooting of Wimble, had parted company with Maria Monk and was biting his nails at the window.

"My dear!" said Louise.

"Oh, my dear soul, at last!" replied Berty. "But, I say, this is a shocking business. I——"

"I thought it might be when I sent you," said Louise. "Never mind. Come downstairs with me and tell my brother about it. He's naturally rather upset and impatient, but not with you, of course."

"But I've told him all I know. What does he want me to do now?"

"Simply to tell him how to get to this place, I suppose. He's going there at once."

"Oh. He won't want me to go with him, will he?"

"No, no. I shouldn't think so."

"Is he there?" resounded from below. "Hallo, there, you upstairs! Are you there, you?"

"Oh, Reggy," said Louise, affably, as she descended the stairs. "This is my friend, Mr. Pitts. He——"

"Ha!" cried Reginald, swooping forward from the dining-room doorway and assisting Berty down the last six stairs. "Come! My car is waiting. Direct the chauffeur and in you get."

"Oh, but——"

"Stop that. Don't you start butting me or I'll but you. Direct the chauffeur. Louise, will you stir yourself! You! Wimble! Listen."

He bore Berty across the courtyard and exhibited him to Wimble, shaking the instructions out of him as a master shakes the guilt out of a schoolboy. "There! You are clear, Wimble? Very well, then. See to it. You, Louise, get in. Now you!"

"Oh, but I don't think I ought—I should really have thought——"

"No, thank you," said Reginald. "No poetry just now. Into the car with you."

Mr. Plum's face peered from above the wire blind of the taproom. A singular affair. The dinner for one had been decoyed downstairs by the bosom, and was now apparently being allowed to choose where he would be driven to, in order to be done in.

Diana soon discovered that the cleansing of the parlour could not possibly be accomplished before dark. She did her best with it, but even so, the room could not be slept in. She only succeeded in getting very heated and begrimed, but not disheartened. She even faced the prospect of getting what sleep she could later on by calling into service the only remaining bed in the cottage, namely, the kitchen table, with a heedless laugh. First, though, she would jolly well have a hot bath. The kitchen fire was still in.

She had festooned the range with Henry's articles of

apparel, and these were now dry enough to collect and carry upstairs. She took them to the bedroom and placed them neatly on a chair. At the same time, she collected her own essentials for encampment in the kitchen. Informed Henry that she was heating the water for her bath, and that he could wash if he liked. He liked. Her own preparations for ablution and retirement were thus delayed until that inopportune moment in which, bearing down upon April Cottage from South Ditherton, Reginald halted Wimble at the corner of the zigzag, and stepped out of the car into a puddle; and, bearing down upon April Cottage from Chool, Mrs. Easy and Muriel left the road and took a foot-soaking short cut through the steep plantation.

Diana tested the water in the bath with her toe. Just right; cool enough to get into by tentative stages; hot enough to bask in and soak away the toils and impairments of the busy day. She stepped into the bath; gingerly sat; luxuriously lay.

One cannot lie in bed for several hours, even in pain, without courting at least the curiosity of Morpheus. And the more neat spirits one consumes during this prostrate period, the more pressing become the attentions of the old colleague of Bacchus. Henry, having obediently washed and having been tucked up for the night which was still gradually dimming day, settled his head upon the pillow and closed his eyes.

Then for the first time he became supinely aware of the effects of the brandy on his afflicted system. His head felt heavy; a little leaden weight pressed upon his temples. Soon before his closed eyes appeared the manuscript of Hole on "Woman", but in the distressing form of a gigantic tee-totum, spinning unceasingly and

with the lines blurred and illegible. Here and there a word would advance in letters of increasing size to the edge of the tee-totum, then retreat into the general blur. At length, however, the vile tee-totum ceased to spin and slowly faded from his vision, leaving in its place a spacious Oriental interior, where, surrounded by acres of rich carpet, he reclined upon the April Cottage double bed. Seated on the floor beside him, Diana amused herself by throwing bottles of Hennessy's brandy at the old man from Pillbutton's yard, who caught them dexterously and juggled with them. Right at the end of the hall, across the acres of carpet, was something indefinitely disagreeable; something connected to him by an electric wire, along which a current of pain was occasionally shot into his otherwise lordly and comfortable substance.

"'Ush!" said Mrs. Easy to Muriel in a strained whisper, as they gained the porch. "You foller me. Then we shall see what's what and who's clever."

The front door was open. Mrs. Easy crept into the cottage, Muriel faint-heartedly at her heels. The kitchen was deserted. "You'd best wait in there a moment while I eggsplore," whispered Mrs. Easy. Muriel waited in the kitchen. Mrs. Easy put an ear to the parlour door. Gave a series of six little double sniffs. Opened the parlour door.

Oh, for Mr. Hole at this moment! The sacred parlour of April Cottage, lately her especial charge. In her reign never interfered with. Now not only interfered with, but violated by some wanton rite of riot and burning. Mrs. Easy withdrew from the parlour a face such as one sees only in pictorial representations of the French Revolution.

Leaving Muriel, infirm of purpose but coerced, in the kitchen, Mrs. Easy ascended the stairs.

Muriel, practical even in the midst of alarms, had wet feet; the kitchen a bright fire. She instinctively crossed the room, sat down on a chair which grated along the stone floor, and, raising the sole of one boot to the blaze, knocked over a shovel.

"Sssssh!" from the staircase.

Diana, lying becalmed in the silent delectation of the bath, heard the shovel. Heard the "sssssh!" which, like most feminine sssssshes, was louder than the noise it sought to quell. Sat up, with her hands to the rims of the bath. Then sprang from the bath and pulling open the bathroom door, thrust out an inquiring head.

It was nearly dark now. She saw the figure of, she thought, a woman, turn on the little landing at the bend of the stairs and skedaddle. Stung with a sudden resentment stronger than either alarm or modesty Diana whipped up a bath sheet, flung it over her shoulders, and followed.

She gained the bend of the stairs in time to see the kitchen door closed from within. Without hesitation down she went, grasped the handle of the door. It was held against her. She opened her mouth to challenge the intruder. At the same moment something obliterated the light of day from the porch. Turned her head quickly. A young, strange man. A startled cry, a violent hoisting of the bath sheet, and upstairs she went again. The face of Reginald, looming in the porch. whither Berty had guided it, underwent a quick change. He arrived and glared into the cottage only to see a pair of female legs, briefly shrouded by flapping fabric, scurrying upward out of view.

Diana, on the top landing, hesitated a moment, really alarmed now. Through her brain flashed the thought that here was aggression. That door held against her; the attitude of the man in the doorway, peering, waiting. Danger! She glanced quickly from left to right—at the bathroom door, at the bedroom door. Then came a muffled, masculine word of command from below and stealthy footsteps on the stairs. Diana felt her heart throbbing. A cry died in a choke at her throat. Protection! Even the protection of a crippled ally. She darted at the bedroom door. Closed it behind her quickly, with just a side-glance for the bed, from which came no responding movement.

There was no key to the door. She held to the handle only to feel it turned in her grasp. The bath sheet was slipping from her left shoulder. She released the handle, clutched at the sheet, was swept backward into the room. She shouted something—she didn't know what.

Henry also shouted something; but it is unlikely that he knew what he said either; for his challenge was issued in the rambling tone of dreams, and in terms extravagant.

"Who calls," he demanded, "upon the Wazeer?"

Reginald stood in the doorway, turned to stone, staggered past the ability to move a muscle. Equally transfixed, but in a more uncomfortable attitude of straining amazement, stared from the landing, Louise. At the head of the stairs Berty Pitts stood biting his nails with ravenous nervousness. Reginald's eye slowly rolled from the utterly strange young woman standing behind the bed post and doing her best to hide the fact that she was attired only in a towel, to where, behind a

screen of brandy bottles, forehead-furrowed and one-eyed, gazed at him from the pillow the foolish face of his younger brother. At the foot of the stairs at nudging attention stood Mrs. Easy, performing nose-twisting unprecedented, and Muriel, her face a bigger box and a more widely open box than ever before. And, from the gate-post of April Cottage, Puck turned a delighted somersault, and ten minutes later was in Piccadilly.

Was in Piccadilly just as a taxi, returning from Ciro's even before the theatres were out, turned down Half Moon Street. Inside it were a couple sitting close together and conversing in intimacies very subdued. They unclasped hands and got out of the taxi nonchalantly enough. Mr. Dawkins was not in the hall, and they proceeded upstairs unobserved and in silence.

In the sitting room he took her and held her in his arms. "I love you, you know," he said. "I've only been waiting to love you, all my life."

"I love you too," she said. "I do now. More than I ever thought I could love anybody."

Five minutes of this. He holding her to him tightly, stooping to kiss her; she a little pale, dreamy-eyed and dreamily smiling, trembling rather. At last he released her, but her hand came back into his. She stood for a moment at arm's length from him, her eyes gazing into his. Then she held out her other hand to him.

B'rrrrr——

Still holding her hands he turned with a quick frown.

"Who the devil can that be? It can't be for Lemon; he's gone."

Eleanor did not move; spoke very calmly.

"Reggy," she said. Then with a curt laugh. "He's

too late. I'm not here, see? And if he forces his way in and finds me here, I'm here for good. Is that a bet, Algy?"

He shook her hands. "Absolutely," he said. He jerked his head toward the bedroom door. "But I suppose you'd better—while I just see——"

She nodded. He dropped her hands and she left him. He walked quickly to the door which led to the passage, and stood listening.

B'rrrrr——

With the long strides of exasperation he went and pulled back the latch. Swung open the door with a glare of defiance for the invader.

It was Captain Dumfoil.

CHAPTER XVIII

EXASPERATING EFFICIENCY OF AN ANGEL

"OH, YOU *are* here then?" said Captain Dumfoil.

"Yes?"

"You alone?"

"What? Yes."

"You are alone?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh; well, I can spare you a minute or two," said Captain Dumfoil, entering.

"I've got to go out in about one minute, myself," said Algy.

Captain Dumfoil laughed in a caustic monosyllable. "Ha!" He inspected Algy rather patronizingly. "I don't think so," he added, and led the way uninvited to the sitting room.

"As a matter of fact, I can't stay long myself either," he proceeded. "Still, I thought I'd look you up."

"Well, here I am," said Algy, following his visitor with but little of his customary affability. "What is it?"

"Yes, good job you are here," said Captain Dumfoil, seating himself ponderously on the sofa. "I know where you were just going. You were going to pick up your aunt and push out to Richmond."

"Oh, don't start that again," began Algy; but the other cut him short.

"You wait a minute, young feller-me-lad. I couldn't

make myself sufficiently explicit yesterday morning. I could only warn you to keep clear of the place. I didn't know at the time that the advice was so expedient."

Algy shifted restlessly. "Oh, get it off your chest, Dumfoil."

"All right, all right." Captain Dumfoil raised a quelling palm. He then pulled down his dress waistcoat, examined his front stud, struck a telling attitude, and continued.

"When I saw you yesterday morning I was trying my best to convey to your rather limited intelligence that this place, Shady Nook, was about to receive the attentions of the police."

"What!" Algy's hand gripped the back of a chair. "The police! You never said so."

"You wouldn't let me," said Captain Dumfoil, placing his thumbs in his armholes and leaning back on the sofa complacently. "Of course, I ought not really to have told you as much as I did."

"You didn't tell me anything."

"I told you enough to put you on the *qui vive* if you had any sense. Only you said you repeat everything to your blessed aunt, and I couldn't trust her."

"Do you mean to say that the place is going to be raided?" asked Algy.

Captain Dumfoil nodded in the midst of a yawn.

"When?"

"To-night, I believe. Give me a cigarette, will you?"

Algy handed him the silver box impatiently.

"But how d'you know?" he demanded. "Has someone given information to the police about it?"

"Years," replied Captain Dumfoil, selecting a ciga-

rette and tapping it on the back of his hand. "I have."

"You have?"

"Years," said Captain Dumfoil. He paused to light the cigarette; then returned to his contented attitude on the sofa. "I laid the information about a month ago," he continued. "Since then they've been keeping the place under observation; been fixing things up. Took 'em rather a time, because they had to plant someone as one of the clients, and that meant they had to find a Jew policeman and give him time to win the confidence of the management. I thought it would be soon; but I only heard an hour or so ago that they hoped to bring it off to-night. I've just been along to young Jack Molyneux—stopped him going. Thought I'd do the same for you. Only fair to warn the few decent people who patronize the filthy hole. Frankly, I wouldn't have minded whether your aunt had been copped or not."

"Funny!" said Algy, thoughtfully. "My aunt was saying only yesterday that she——"

"That she what?" asked Captain Dumfoil, suspiciously.

"That she'd treat any crooked place the same way as you've done. Only she swore the Nook wasn't crooked."

"Pooh! Stiff with crooks," said Captain Dumfoil, airily. "Warren of 'em. Phonk, Great Scot! I've watched him at it. He'll be sorry he ever chose me for a victim."

"Well, I'm much obliged for the information," said Algy. "I suppose I'd better let my aunt know."

"Let her know you're not going to take her to-night. Don't let her know why. She holds a brief for Phonk

and I don't trust her, and that's that. She'll find out why soon enough."

"But, dash it, I must warn her."

"No need to warn her at all. Simply tell her you're not going to take her. If she chooses to go down there on her own, that's her lookout."

"But be reasonable, Dumfoil. Suppose I found out that she—that she'd failed to take the hint and had gone down there——?"

"You do what I tell you. Tell her not to go—say you're not going to take her and she'd better stay at home."

"But she'd want to know the reason."

"Yes, and then if you tell her the reason she'll try and warn Phonk."

"I'll swear to you that Phonk shall not be warned. There!"

Captain Dumfoil grunted querulously.

"Oh, what's the good?" he said. "She's an incorrigible old gambler. She's been bound over twice already. If she chooses to make pals of crooks, she doesn't deserve to be considered."

Algy paraded the room restlessly, then halted at the table.

"Look here, Dumfoil," he said, "whether you're right or wrong about Phonk, the fact remains that you've taken the trouble to call here and put me wise. I may not agree with your methods but, by all the rules of the game, I can't warn Phonk, even if I wanted to. And if I tell my aunt, I'll guarantee the same thing holds good."

Captain Dumfoil shook his head.

"I know women's ideas of sportsmanship," he said.

"I've had some. She'd say I'd done the dirty, and she'd pretend she was justified. Always some wriggle. I know women."

"She shall not tell a soul. I give you my word. Is that good enough?"

"You swear that?"

"I swear it."

"I suppose you'll hop off straight away now, and tell her?"

"Yes," said Algy.

Captain Dumfoil rose; knocked an irresolute ash into a silver tray on the table.

"Then she'll give you a promise and break it."

"No, she won't," said Algy. "What time is this —round-up due to begin?"

"Why?"

"Because I shall probably remain with her until then."

"Oh, I see. Yes, you'd better. Though, as a matter of fact, I don't know when it's coming off. Of course, it may not come off at all to-night. If it doesn't . . ."

"If it doesn't my guarantee holds good," said Algy, quickly.

Captain Dumfoil laughed bluntly.

"You've got a dashed sight more confidence in the other sex than I have," he said.

"Yes," said Algy. "Perhaps I've been luckier."

"H'm! Well—I'm away."

"Righto," said Algy, agreeably. "Many thanks. Very friendly of you to come."

"That's all right," said Captain Dumfoil, as he walked to the door. "It isn't you we're after. So long."

He turned in the passage. "Now, don't forget. Keep an eye on that aunt."

"Oh, I will," said Algy.

He returned from seeing Captain Dumfoil off the premises and stood for a brief, irresolute space in the sitting-room doorway. He glanced toward the bedroom, then at the gathering night through the window. Swore curtly, but with a wealth of feeling. The bedroom door opened cautiously.

He hurried to Eleanor.

"Elly! Did you hear?"

"Not very much. Who was it, and what did he want?"

"There's a raid on the Nook."

"Raid? The Nook?"

"Shady Nook. The place at Richmond where Auntie goes. The place where Auntie's gone. They're going to raid it. The police are going to raid Auntie."

Eleanor looked at him inquiringly. She seemed on the point of expressing gratification at these tidings, but his worried frown checked her, and she bit her lip.

"Does that matter?" she asked.

"Matter!" he cried. "Elly, it means I must go."

"Where?"

"To Richmond, my dear. I must go down there, don't you see?"

"To get raided, too?"

"To lug Auntie out of it. Mustn't I? I must. Elly, I must."

She intertwined her fingers.

"Now?" she asked.

He sighed, but made no answer. He seemed to be waiting for her decision. "Yes," she went on, in a

quick, practical tone, "I suppose it's the right thing to do, isn't it?"

"Well, I can't get to hear of her being in a thing like this and leave her to it, can I?" said Algy, gloomily.

"How long will you be?"

"I'll nip round and get my car and run down there. I know how to get into the place, even if they're watching it. I'll have her out of it and push her off home, and come straight back here. I don't know—an hour?"

"Will it be exciting? Any danger? I'll come too, if you like," said Eleanor.

"That's out of the question. You'll have to wait here. There won't be any excitement at all, especially if I go at once."

"But if they catch you?"

"They won't catch me. I shall be too early. And even if they do catch me, I expect I can wangle out of it. They won't start shooting, you know, or anything like that. It isn't America. They might have to put the bracelets on Auntie. But I can get away with it before any of the fun starts if only I dash off at once."

"Your aunt won't want to come back here?"

"I won't let her. One good turn deserves another. She can jolly well go home to her bed and not be inquisitive."

"I'm to wait here alone?"

"Not for long. I'll be back in an hour; it's hardly dark yet."

She pouted prettily. "I know; but . . ."

"I know, too," he said, and caught her to him. "Only an hour, Elly; only an hour, old darling."

At this point came the first flash of lightning, a more

admonitory clap of thunder, and soon afterward, as we know, Lemon's key in the lock of the front door.

"It's all right," said Algy; "it's only Lemon. It must be. He's the only person who's got a key. Lemon! Lemon!"

He released Eleanor, and buttonholed Lemon, as the latter blundered agape into the sitting room.

"Lemon, look here. I've got to chase out. Mrs. Krabbe has gone to Richmond, and I've just heard that the cops are out and beating her up. So I must go down and have her out of it. See?"

"Dear me, how awkward, sir," said Lemon.

"Yes. Mrs. Bingham will be waiting here till I get back. You'd better stay, too."

"Yes, sir," said Lemon. "But how long? . . ."

Algy passed him and removed his mackintosh from the rack in the passage.

"How the devil do I know?" he replied. "Here, give me a hand into this. I'll take my cap. Where is it?"

"There, sir, on the end peg. But I might be wanting to get home again, sir. Things are getting a move on."

"Well, the sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back." He scrambled into the mackintosh, whipped the cap from the peg, and ran back to the sitting-room doorway to kiss his hand to Eleanor.

"I'll be here," she said. "Don't be long."

"You bet I won't. Good-bye, old thing."

"It's starting to rain heavy, sir," said Lemon; "also to lightning."

"That's right. Keep cheerful," replied Algy, and was gone.

Lemon, apparently a little vague as to what was

expected of him, returned solicitously to the sitting room. Eleanor was at the window, drumming her fingers on the ledge.

"You know all about this, then?" she said.

"Er . . .?"

"You know all about this gambling business?"

"Oh. Yes, madam. He's confided to me in confidence about it," replied Lemon.

"What happens to you if you get caught?"

"Well, I don't exactly know, madam. As far as the gambling goes, it's generally only a caution, I believe, or, at the worst, a fine. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, madam," continued Lemon with misgiving, "of course interfering with the police in the execution of their duty, that's more serious."

"Is that what he's doing?" asked Eleanor, casually.

"If he's caught, it is," replied Lemon, judiciously. "I knew a feller that got a month for it, madam."

"Dear, dear," remarked Eleanor, window-ledge drumming. "I won't want to have to wait here for a month."

Lemon made no comment on this, but asked whether there was anything he could do for her. She replied, "No," with many thanks. She would stay where she was, and watch the storm. It was rather fascinating. Very vivid lightning. He'd better close the window, though. The rain was coming in.

He crossed the room and closed the window for her. The storm did not serve to relieve his settled melancholy. In fact, he dimly seemed to recollect some dismal legend concerning the grievous effects of thunder and lightning upon women at childbed. He felt al-

most bound to remonstrate politely with his visitor's heedless relish for the hostilities of heaven.

"Excuse me, madam, but I think you want to be careful with lightning—how you go too near it and that. A feller I knew had his brother struck."

"Really?" replied Eleanor. "Your friends seem to have had rather a thin time, one way and another. Oh, did you see that flash?"

"Yes, indeed I did, madam."

"Right across the sky."

"Yes, madam. Almost like electricity," said Lemon.

A tremendous, culminating roll of thunder; then, in a brief, intense torrent, the rain. It spent its violence against the window, where Eleanor remained alone, for Lemon had withdrawn into his hermitage pantry. The full lashing anger of the storm was soon over, and, to the accompaniment of the thunder as it boomed away into the distance, the rain relapsed into a steady downpour.

Eleanor stood there for a long while, then slowly turned from the window. Her storm was over, too—her heart-storm, her passion. While she had been waiting in that other room—while that man had been talking to Algy—she had felt vexation pricking her; and had known even then in her heart that it was not merely the vexation of being interrupted. It was the vexation of realizing that this was a love which could not weather interruption.

She had keyed herself up to a mad moment—all through the day—to this crisis. Every minute of pleasure she had enjoyed that evening, in her short round of gaiety, had been merely a preliminary, a titillation. Then, just as she raised her hand to pluck

the fruit, circumstance had caught her by the wrist. The moment of crisis had come and gone. The wild mood passed from her as the storm raged and passed, leaving only the steady drizzle of normal life, normal affections. The thunder was scarcely audible now. The spell was broken.

She confessed to herself how effortful had been the weaving of that spell. Difficult enough at times to defer to a guardian angel; more difficult yet to get rid of him for long.

She returned to the sofa, and sat there in the darkness, and half in tears. But, even then, the tears were the very human tears of disappointment at having failed in her wanton caprice, rather than the tears of self-reproach at having submitted to it. Of all our mortifications the most teasing is to be baulked of a peccadillo.

Presently she rose and had another look at the weather. Still raining persistently. She wouldn't be able to get a taxi just now for love or money. All the same, the rain wouldn't last for ever, and the theatre crowds would disperse before long. She switched up the light, and went to the writing table.

DEAREST OLD ALGY,

I know I said I'd be here when you came back, but—somehow—that interruption and all—*you* know. I expect you feel the same really, and I don't believe it will ever be quite like that again. I don't think it was really going to be happiness—just a sort of reckless fit. All my doing—I know I'm frightfully impulsive and weird. Help me to be just your old pal Elly again. I'm going home. I expect I can make it up with Reggy, only there aren't going to be any sackcloth and ashes, and we'll meet again soon. Understand me, won't you? With love.

ELLY.

P.S.—Hope you rescued Mrs. K. I know you had to go. Don't think for a moment that I was against your going. This doesn't sound affectionate, but oh, you dear old thing, I daresay we shall really go on being fonder of each other than we ever could have if — You know.

She enclosed the note in an envelope, stuck it, and scribbled his name. Left the envelope on the writing table. Again to the window. No; rain, rain. Should she ring up Prince's Gate for the car? No. A few hours before, she was willing almost to court gossip and belowstairs speculation. Now she only desired to return to her home dignified and unexplained. She would repack her portmanteau, and get Lemon to try and get her a taxi.

Then, once more, *b'rrr*—the electric bell, and the sound of Lemon scuttling from his retreat. She stood, her hand on the centre table, upright, listening; catching her breath in a little nervous laugh. Oh, perversity of fate! If this were Reggy now!

Lemon pushed a haunted face into the room as he passed.

"It's for me, I feel sure," he whispered. "Still, I'd better keep this door closed, madam, while I make sure."

She nodded.

"Yes, all right."

He closed the door, but she nipped off the light, and opened it again. Stood intently, holding it just ajar.

Dawkins's voice. "There's a gentlem'n here asking for Mr. Gascoyne. . . ."

Lemon's agitated reply: "'E's not 'ere; 'e's not 'ere."

"Well, I told 'im I thought not, but . . ."

Then the sound of one arriving upon the scene, evidently out of breath and of temper.

"I don't care a damn whether he's out or in. I've been to every hotel in this infernal city looking for a bed, and I'll go no further."

Lemon again: "Good heavens, it's you, sir!"

"Yes, it is. Get out of the way. I'm coming in here."

"What, did you miss your train then, sir?"

"Do I look as if I'd caught it? I wish to God I'd come straight back here, instead of trying about fifty pestilential hotels and getting caught in the rain."

"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"I left my luggage at Paddington. You'll have to find me some things. I don't care where I sleep, so long as I sleep in the dry. Take that umbrella. Shut that door."

Eleanor took the hint and shut hers. A moment later gently shut the door of the bedroom.

"Well, come along; where do I go?" demanded Mr. Hole.

"Er—the—er—sitting room is in here, sir; but—er—one moment, sir, and I'll jest—see if it's—straight."

"I don't care whether it's straight or crooked, so long as it's dry," said Mr. Hole.

Lemon fumbled with the sitting-room door-handle; turned it, directed an agonized glance into the room. Then, temporarily relieved, entered and switched on the light. Mr. Hole followed, shaking the wetness from his garments.

"You can take my coat and waistcoat and dry 'em," he said, removing the articles in question. "What's in there? His bedroom?"

"Er—yes, sir; but . . ."

"All right, then. I'll go in there in a moment, and take my trousers off."

Lemon could not recall having ever been faced with a predicament so distressing. He saw now that he had made a diplomatic slip at the outset. If only he had said, "A lady is here, sir, waiting for Mr. Gascoyne to take her out dancing," all might have been saved. His silence now definitely pointed the guilt of his master and of Mrs. Bingham. He was a very conscientious servant. It did not occur to him that they had only themselves to blame.

He sailed into the strategic fray, snatching at inspiration as he went.

"You must have some whisky, sir. I can see you shivering. If you'll take a seat on that sofa, sir, I'll help you off with your boots, and get you a nice warm dressing gown and a drink of whisky."

Weariness overcame the normal truculence of Mr. Hole. He sat upon the sofa in his shirt and trousers and agreed to imbibe whisky.

"That's right, sir," said Lemon, assiduously at the sideboard. "Half-and-half, sir, or neat?"

"Neat," said Mr. Hole. "But I'd rather take brandy. Hasn't he got any brandy?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Lemon.

"H'ngh!" growled Mr. Hole. "Whisky and brandy —the young rip! All right; give me some brandy."

"There, sir," said Lemon, handing him a goodly measure. "And now you'll want the dressing gown."

Mr. Hole repeated a muffled threat concerning his trousers; but Lemon succeeded in gaining the bedroom, very much in the manner of a lion-tamer making his

exit from the cage at the conclusion of a performance.

"Oh, madam," whispered the harassed man, "it is the master's uncle. He talks of staying here for the night. He may come in this room at any moment."

"Is it the old gentleman the cottage belongs to? Mr. Hole, the woman-hater?" asked Eleanor.

"Yes, madam. But you see there's this other door leading out from this room into the passage, if you . . ."

"If I what? I can't spend the night flitting from one room to another and hiding. Why shouldn't he know I was here?"

"Oh, madam, I—don't please think I am going beyond what I ought to say, but I don't think it would do the master any good if the old gent found you here."

This seemed to impress Eleanor. She took thought, glanced around at the disorder of the bedroom, then comforted Lemon with a nod.

"Well, I *was* just going when he arrived. So keep him in that room, and I'll put my things together and go. I can call for my luggage in the morning. I'll leave it under the bed."

"Thank you, madam. And he won't hear you packing, will he?"

Eleanor waved the pessimist away. "Not if you go and keep him busy in the sitting room."

But circumstances were against Lemon. No sooner had he regained the sitting room, edging through the doorway with a Jaeger dressing gown, and a transparently forced grin of blandishment for Mr. Hole, who, by this time, had his boots off and was squeezing the slack of his trousers analytically, than—*b'rrrr* once more, and this favourite butt for the pranks of Puck had

to down the Jaeger on the centre table, gasp an apology, and make for the door again like a scared spider.

"Oh, excuse me, sir; that's for me, I think. I'm expecting a call from 'ome. My wife—excuse me, sir, jest a moment. Oh, deary me! . . ." He did not wait for the inevitably caustic comment from the sofa.

Yes—right this time. Mr. Dawkins at the door. "Ho, Mr. Lemon, there's a message for you. They can do with you at 'ome now, as soon as you can get round."

"Oh, my Gawd! Any news? Anything definite?"

"No, that's all that was said. A boy from the mews brought the message. 'E's 'opped it."

"Oh, all right, Mr. Dawkins."

Back to the sitting room.

"Yes, it's what I thought, sir. It's my wife. She's having a baby. I feel I ought to go. But . . ."

"Then go. I don't want you."

"No, sir, but . . . Yes, sir, but . . ."

"Go! I'm not keeping you. Go, go!"

"Oh, lawd! Yes, sir, I . . ." He dithered, unable to resist a glance of sidelong apprehension at the bedroom door. "I dessay I ought to stay, but I feel I must do my duty to my wife."

"You appear to have done that," said Mr. Hole; "get out!"

"Oh—but . . ."

"Get out! Get—get—out—out! Get out."

"Oh, lawd!" repeated Lemon, below his breath, and got out.

He sneaked into the bedroom from the passage.

Eleanor was folding stockings with preposterous care and indifference to danger.

"All right," she whispered. "I heard. Run along."

"Madam, if you'd like to leave your things as they are, and let me see you out now . . ."

"Then he'll only come in here and find my things knocking about the room. Just as bad as finding me. Rather worse. I'll finish and find my way out all right."

Lemon bowed to Fate, hurried to his pantry, assumed his foolish bowler, closed the front door of the rooms behind him and pelted downstairs. Threw from his bent back the weight of other people's troubles, and coursed out into the darkness and rain to shoulder his own.

During Mr. Hole's perambulations in search of hotel accommodation, a young person (a woman, of course) had run out from the cover of a building to get into a waiting taxi, and had stepped in a puddle, thereby wetting Mr. Hole's trousers. He could still feel that particular patch of damp just above the right knee, and thought he detected a responsive ache in the limb below. In his state of health, to remain there, sitting on a sofa with wet trousers, was ridiculous. He arose and crossed the room in his socks to the bedroom door, making no sound.

Forewarned as she was, Eleanor was quite startled.

CHAPTER XIX

SO MUCH FOR BERTY PITTS

THIS should satisfy Puck on his midsummer night. Two ladies discovered in respective bedrooms. The one in affrighted innocence; the other culpable in her original intention, and innocent only through the chance intervention of Captain Dumfoil, followed hotly by the resuscitated guardian angel.

But the blameless lady in the company of a gentleman who is wearing one of her nightgowns, sustained by brandy, and in her bed. The culpable lady unattended. The blameless lady clad only in a bath towel; the culpable lady in full evening dress. The blameless lady damned at a glance; the culpable lady armed with the cool alibi of the errant swain somewhere halfway between Richmond and Vine Street. The blameless lady shrinking in towel-hoisting indignation from the flabbergasted pursuer of the culpable. The culpable lady archly greeting the empurpling inquisitor of the blameless.

Of the surprised quartette in the April Cottage room, Diana first found tongue, with Louise a good second—trust the women.

"Who are you, and how dare you come in here like this?"

"And who are *you;* and how dare you be here with him, of all people in the world, and in this state?"

Reginald then partially recovered.

"Silence, you!" Out went the forefinger at the bed. "You! Where is my wife? What the devil are you doing here, lying lushed in a bed? With this person in a towel? How under heaven did you get here? Where is my wife?"

Henry awkwardly raised his head from the pillow, but continued to keep one eye closed, which gave a woeful impression.

"Clear out of this room, you blundering great goof," he retaliated. "How dare you come bursting into buildings, and frightening young ladies out of their baths?"

"Don't you dare try and bounce me," roared Reginald. "You are spiced. Why are you here at all? Where is my wife and that other blackguard of a fellow? There's no need to ask what's going on here, but where is my wife? Do you think I've come posting home from the Continent and down to this place to look at you lying tanked in a bedroom? You, madam—in the towel. If he can't answer, perhaps you can. Where is my wife?"

"I sha'n't tell you anything," said Diana, "while you're cad enough to stand there and I'm in this state."

"Don't you worry," said Henry. "Trot back to your bath. I'll fix this. I know how to deal with this stiff. He's my brother. Get out of the way, you great hulking tough, and let her go back to her bath."

Reginald moved to one side, chiefly in order to emphasize his questions with his fist on the washing stand, and Diana, seizing this opportunity, made a dash for the door. She was by no means dry yet, and Louise backed instinctively. Berty Pitts, on the land-

ing, came to attention like a ranker. The bathroom door closed with a bang.

"And who is that woman, and what is all this?" demanded Louise, reëntering the bedroom, but Reginald silenced her with one crash of the soap dish.

"Stop that." To Henry—"You! Where are they?"

Henry again sought the pillow in the most intolerably lackadaisical manner.

"Gone to town, of course," he said, sleepily. "What do you suppose? There's barely room in this cottage for the two of us. A foursome would be quite out of the question."

"Wake up now!" pursued Reginald. "I want the details of this degraded affair. You may be *sostenuto*, but you can talk. Wake up, or by Christopher, I'll come and knock what I want out of you."

This threat had no effect on Henry, who remained impassive, but was, truth to tell, engaging in acute mental exercise on the pillow. Louise was his trouble. How was he to account for his presence without giving Willy away? By the time Reginald had advanced from the washing stand, drawing himself up and apparently contemplating assault, Diana, now shrouded in nightgown and dressing gown, had emerged from the bathroom, and, with a quick stare of undisguised hostility for Berty Pitts on the landing, came once more to face the invasion of the bedroom. The sight of her brought Henry his inspiration. He again grunted into an awkward attitude on one elbow.

"If you want to know why I'm here and in these—circumstances and bed and nightgown and so on," he said, "I don't mind telling you, though it's no business of yours."

"I want to know where my wife is," shouted Reginald.

"That's all part of it. Listen, and don't interrupt. And don't stick out your finger at me, or I'll throw a bottle of brandy at it. I am in this bed because I've had a very bad fall and crippled myself. I'm in this nightgown because I got wet through coming here. And I'm here at all, because I was sent for."

"Who by?" asked Louise.

"By Miss Richardson Gascoyne," replied Henry, with a blink of assurance at Diana. "This is Miss Richardson Gascoyne. This lady, whose hospitality you have so modestly and deferentially accepted."

Reginald snorted with impatience. "Will—you——?"

"Stop that," said Henry with authority. "I am telling the tale. And if I want any ventriloquism, I'll send you a postcard."

He settled himself more comfortably on the elbow. Just as he was about to plunge into his revelations, he decided that he could do with a little drop more brandy. Reginald began to parade the narrow space between the bed and the washing stand like an infuriated sea captain on his bridge. Henry then filled and ignited a deliberate pipe.

Eventually, he began, with a good deal of puffing, to relate his version of the day's events. Eleanor came to stay at this cottage, the property of Mr. Hole, a noted authority on Woman. Diana's brother Algy, who also, for some groundless reason, appeared to some of them to be an ardent student of the same subject, followed his friend Eleanor down to the cottage—and why not? However, this Diana, Miss Richardson Gascoyne—but it would save time to refer to her as

Diana if she didn't mind—being a lady of such an extraordinary nature that she was able to combine successfully exceptional beauty with the most transparent and admirable sense of virtue—a rare combination, owing to the considerable difficulty which a lady naturally finds in being both very pretty and very good—and Louise needn't look like that, because she had never had to face the difficulty and didn't know—anyhow, this Miss Diana had felt just a trifle restless about Eleanor and Algy. She had quite expected Algy to blow in on the heels of Eleanor, and wasn't entirely satisfied in her own peerless mind that it was all quite nice. So she had asked him, Henry, to come down, too, to support her, and to confirm the impressions that he had always held, and still continued to hold with regard to the perfect innocence and justification of Eleanor's friendship with Algy.

Well, down comes Eleanor and down comes Algy sure enough. And Diana (or Miss Diana, or, better still perhaps, the goddess Diana, Diana being the goddess of radiant maidenhood, in addition to hunting and sleeping in the moon), allows, perhaps, just for once, her inherent virtue to became a trifle too transparent; and directly Algy shows up, she is unable to prevent Eleanor from spotting that she has her suspicions. Poor Eleanor, innocent of any improper design as a babe unborn, discovers with horror that her dear friend thinks she is working the Potiphar's wife stuff on Algy, who, with all his excellent qualities, is no Joseph. This naturally gets Eleanor's goat. There is a brief display of fireworks, and off she bungs with Algy in pique and a twelve-cylinder Woolworth; but even more in innocence than ever, her very bunging

off in this manner being a demonstration of disgust at being doubted. He, Henry, arrived too late to do any good, and had definitely decided not to apply for a job with the Fire Brigade.

"That'll do," cried Reginald. "Where did they go? Where?" He swung round on Diana. "You, pray? You were here when they went—where did they go?"

"To London, naturally," replied Diana. "That's where they live, isn't it?"

He stared past her with wide eyes, visualizing the now inevitable results of this fatiguing tragedy of misdirected effort and inflaming muddling. He slowly turned, his fingers twitching. Glanced at Henry, who was now attempting to rest his head upon the pillow and to smoke at the same time. Useless to waste good wrath on this despicable and half-pickled noodle. A better victim was near at hand. Louise flinched as she met his eye.

Berty Pitts had drawn nearer to the door, held in compelling horror, like a serpent-haunted rabbit, by the narration of Henry. He shifted his position a little, on hearing the first trend of Reginald's latest outburst.

"You! You see what you've done? Plotting with some flap-eared spy and getting hold of the dirty end of the stick!" . . .

An unwholesome atmosphere. Berty decided that he would feel more comfortable in the garden. The landing, and indeed the whole interior of April Cottage, was by this time very dark. Berty stole, sideways and still listening, toward the staircase.

At the head of the staircase, he pulled up with an

involuntary cry of surprise. Some unexpected sentinel gripped him by the arm. Muriel, hearing the voice of her beloved stout one, had made bold to ascend.

"No, you don't," whispered Muriel. "Not yet."

"Who's that out there?" asked Diana, sharply.

The whole bitterness of failure swelled up and burst from Louise in a wave of recrimination.

"If they weren't here this afternoon, you were. And I know what went on in this room, because it was heard."

Henry cocked up an eye from the pillow.

"What's that?"

"Yes," cried Louise. "Heard! A friend of mine came and heard everything. He thought it was Eleanor in the room, but it's none the less true of whoever *was* here. . . ."

"What friend of yours?" demanded Diana. "No one came here. And if anybody did, there was nothing . . ."

She broke off and made for the door, but an unexpected champion stayed her, pushed back his sleeves, pulled down his coat, pulled back his shoulders, tweaked his nose, and made for the door instead.

"Leave him to me," said Reginald. "I'm the best person to deal with him." He heaved out into the landing. "Now then, where is this hop?"

"Here he be, sur," said Muriel.

It all happened so quickly that Mrs. Easy, who, after starting much more confidently than Muriel, had refused to budge from the hall, was taken by surprise. All she knew was that a body was hurled violently from the darkness aloft. When she knew anything else, she knew she was sitting in the hall. Near at hand and

in a similar attitude, but holding his head, was the detective. From the bend of the stairs came a satisfied valediction. "There! So much for you and your bo-peep."

The detective remained where he was, but Mrs. Easy struggled to her feet, rehearsing threats of vengeance dire, when Mr. Hole should return to his polluted home. Before she could give due utterance to these, she was once more made the victim of sudden collision, Louise having indignantly pushed past her brother on the staircase, and hastened down to the assistance of Berty. Mrs. Easy lost her balance, and so did Louise. The floor of the darkened hall gave a passing impression of being occupied by some reveller returning intoxicated from representing an octopus at a carnival.

On the landing, Diana peered curiously into the face of Muriel.

"I coom, miss," the latter made haste to explain, "for to back up like the stout gentleman. I 'eard lies being spook of him on the 'phoon at the hotel."

Diana, calmly prepared for almost any development of this nightmare, led the girl to the bedroom.

"Come in here," she said, "and explain what you mean."

She struck a match and lit a candle which stood on the chimney-piece. Muriel remained in the doorway, breathing deeply and regarding her wounded hero with a fatuous and yearning smile.

Henry blinked his perplexity. "Is that girl in the flesh," he asked, "or was Reggy right about me?"

At this point Reginald strode back into the room, somewhat appeased for the moment.

"I have got rid of that sneaking mess," he informed Diana. "Kicked him downstairs. I—ah—must apologize. . . ."

"Not at all," said Henry. "Go and kick yourself downstairs too."

"I—ah . . ." continued Reginald, disregarding this, "I know that you may have thought that I acted rather—— Hallo! Who is this young woman?"

"You leave her alone," said Henry. "I don't know in the least why she's here, but the place seems stiff with people, so I daresay it's all right."

"H'm," said Reginald. "How came she in here, listening to my private affairs?"

"Well, my goodness," said Diana, "you're pretty cool, I must say. You didn't exactly break the front-door bell yourself, did you?"

Reginald lowered his face and multiplied his chins.

"I was entirely misinformed," he said, "by that sister of mine and that greaser. Never mind. I kicked him down the stairs. Now I must go back at once to London. There'll be some more kicking downstairs before I've finished my night's work, I can promise you."

"Oh, hell!" said Henry. "Only too pleased to get rid of you, but where are you going thumping and roaring off to now, you great thunder-gusted boob?"

"Thank you," replied Reginald. "I know where to go, well enough. I feel I must once more apologize in a measure to you, Miss—ah——"

"Oh, get out," said Henry, "and take Louise with you. Also the gentleman who is now at the foot of the stairs, and anybody else that you happen to find strolling about the premises."

Louise and Berty had by this time disentangled themselves from the morass of struggling humanity in the hall, and had dragged themselves into the porch, where Mrs. Easy stood, waving her great hands in their faces and prophesying. At the approach of Reginald, she withdrew to the right-hand corner of the cottage, but continued to prophesy.

"Reggy!" exclaimed Louise. "It is monstrous, your treatment of Berty. After all he has gone through for you to-day, to be assaulted and kicked. . . ."

"If he stands there within range of me, by Christopher, I'll kick him again," replied Reginald.

"To-morrer 'e'll be back," said Mrs. Easy. "To-morrer. Then we shall see what some of you get. You little know."

"What! Who is that man? Stop that, will you?"

"You must apologize at once," said Louise. "You lost your temper and behaved like a—like a bull. I can only say . . ."

"Silence!" said Reginald. "You, you miserable little sneaking, lying . . ."

"Those who are staying there, and, likewise, those who have come there and helped to mess the place up. All in it. And all will get it likewise. You little know. I do."

"I am going to London," said Reginald, with a sniff of disgust for the corner of the house. "You will come with me at once. Attend, will you! Don't take any notice of that person. Some beer-sodden peasant."

"I will come when you have apologized to Berty, and not before. How do you expect us to come back to town with you, when he is still bruised by your brutal boots?"

"I don't. I don't! There's no question of *his* coming back, so you needn't think it."

"I shall get to know 'oo's 'oo," said Mrs. Easy, "and when I do, woe betide 'em."

"I shall certainly not take him back to London," said Reginald. "Why should I? After he's had the effrontery . . ."

"I don't want to go back," said Berty. "I don't think you're safe. You've no control over yourself, sir. I don't suppose you know now what you've done."

"To poke his nose into my private domestic affairs," continued Reginald. "And, with your help . . ."

"You wait till Mr. Hole gets the names of those who has been and come and disgraced his cottage," cried Mrs. Easy, who was even more annoyed at being ignored than at having been mishandled, and, like many another dame in a temper, was inclined to become uncontrolled and fantastic in her threats. "Blotted out, that's what they'll get—like some of them bad mockers in the 'Oly Bible."

"And, with your help, to botch the whole business up for me," proceeded Reginald.

"I shall not come home with you unless you apologize and take him too," said Louise.

"I am not going home, and I don't want you with me in the least. So, as regards that . . ."

"Then what do you suppose we are going to do?" asked Louise.

"We can go back to that hotel," whispered Berty.

"You can go to the devil," said Reginald.

"You must take us there," said Louise.

"I'm going the other way. I've no time to waste.

Oh, very well—to get rid of you, I will drive you to the hotel. Only he must sit in front with Wimble. I cannot stand him in with me."

"I'd rather be outside," said Berty.

"Sodom and Gomorrow," said Mrs. Easy, soaring upon the wings of simile, in her neglected wrath, "will be nothing to it—nothing. A game of spillikings to it will it be." With which Parthian shot, she withdrew into the bushes.

A few minutes later, Diana bade Muriel a pleasant good-night, and thanked her for her good intentions. The girl rather wistfully replied that she would gladly do more than that for so kind a gentleman, and, when she reached the porch, lingered one-footed for a moment, then turned with a last pleading effort.

"Oh, miss! Can you manage single? Would you allow me for to stay and be his nurrse for the night?"

"No, thank you," replied Diana, gently, and closed the door of April Cottage upon the eventful evening.

Muriel found her bicycle in the hedge outside the tightly bolted and unilluminated abode of Mrs. Easy. She had no matches, but the moon was doing her best to struggle through the heavy clouds.

In the car Louise began silently to waver. She had always known it was impossible to dictate to Reggy, and she began to regret having tried to do so on this occasion. It would be most inconvenient to stay the night at this hotel. She had nothing to sleep in, or to wash herself with, or to comb herself with, or to clean her teeth with. She had left at home all these requisites, all her other toilet accessories, her much-needed medicines and her crucifix. She was chagrined at the failure of her promised and sweeping personal victory

over Eleanor. She was considerably shaken and bruised by her collision with Mrs. Easy, and her participation in the shambles of the hall floor. But she stuck to her point.

"I would come home with you, if you would apologize. You may leave him here if you like, but I insist upon your apologizing."

Unfortunately Reginald stuck to his.

"I am not going home. Where I am going, I prefer to go alone."

The car drew up before the darkened portal of the Ring o' Bells.

Louise eyed her brother. "Well—leave him here," she said, "and I'll come with you. I daresay, when you think it over, you'll agree to apologize."

Reginald was no longer in furious mood, but calculating again, heavy-browed and mouth-working. He turned to Louise with an air of long-suffering finality.

"Open the door and get out!"

"Well, Reggy, I think I'll . . ."

"Open the door and get out. You, in front! Get off the box."

Louise flared. "I think your behaviour is simply disgraceful," she said.

"Thank you. The less you interfere in my affairs for the future, the better they may progress."

"Interfere! When you came to me yourself, and . . ."

"Did I come and ask you to make a howling mess of a simple commission? With your nosing outsiders? Get out of my car, and stay out of my car. You! Wimble!"

Wimble, one of those well-trained chauffeurs who

hear only remarks addressed to themselves, descended, and came to the door of the car.

"Help Mrs. Piper out of the car; then drive back."

"Where to, sir?"

"To London."

"Reggy! This is . . ."

"T'ch'ach!" said Reginald, in a hoarse whisper. "In front of the man! Kindly get out of the car." He helped her on her way with a push. She bridled and got out.

"To London, sir?" repeated Wimble, incredulously.

"Yes—to London."

"Excuse me, sir; it'll take all night, I'm afraid."

"I'm quite aware of that."

"Very good, sir."

"I know it's very good, thank you. If it wasn't very good, I wouldn't go. Come along. Up you get. Move!"

Mr. Plum received his guests with a dazed tolerance. He had always anticipated that the dinner for one would, if spared, return to bide; but that the bosom should also turn up again and demand a bed, was a complete surprise. She might have a bed, but she'd have to wait for it. Muriel was still out. He himself could not make beds. The barman was unlikely to be able to make much of a bed. Mother could make beds, but had rheumatism, and had herself sought the downy. (Mother was Mrs. Plum. She it was who, on Henry's arrival, swam briefly into our ken with a dish-cloth, called Muriel, and swam out again.) So the lady must wait for her bed, unless she took the dinner for one's bed, and he waited. Neither of them had any luggage, or seemed, even now, fully prepared to bide.

They said they would wait and go to bed when both beds were ready. Together they limped upstairs to the lounge to wait. Mr. Plum went to the taproom, and had a beer and let 'em be. Muriel progressed to their aid very slowly, cautiously, and peeringly in the fickle moonlight.

"Dear boy," cried Louise, the moment they were alone in the lounge, "how can I tell you how sorry I am for the way you've been treated. I shall never forgive my brother. I'm not surprised that his wife has run away from him."

Berty moaned on the sofa.

"The fierce brute! He knocked me about terribly. I wasn't prepared for him, or—ohh! I believe I've ricked my spine."

She hastened to his side.

"Where, my poor boy? All for my sake. If only I'd known! Where are you hurt?"

"Just here. Just above the lower part of the back."

"I wish I had some of my embrocation with me. I'd rub you. Perhaps they have some sort of embrocation here. I'll find that man and ask. And I'll give you a good massage, you poor, dear thing."

Mr. Plum, called from the bar, had some stuff they used for horses. He'd see whether he could put his hand on it in a few minutes. For the moment, he was busy. He waited until the lady had returned to the lounge, then had another beer, and did one or two other jobs in the taproom. He kept nodding to himself significantly. So the dinner for one *had* been dotted. He thought he was going to be.

It was getting late when Muriel reached South Ditherton, but she was mindful of her promise, and proceeded

first to Mrs. Leake, who was still up, and came wrestling excitedly with the bolts of her shop door. Muriel ran the Sunbeam into its rack, and turned bursting with narrative.

Halfway through the tangled tale, shadowy figures hovered outside the plate-glass windows of the cycle shop. Two men. Mrs. Leake muttered an interjection, and swept to the door. .

One of the two men was Dan, the railway porter. The other an elderly stranger.

"'Oo, Mrs. Leake," said Dan, "this gen'm'n 'e coom be the laate train."

"Well, why bring 'im 'ere?"

"Wull," replied Dan, "ther' ain't no conveyance around these days, ye see; not since Pawley's mowerr be 'ad a mishap to. So I bring 'im 'ere, for to see whether or no you could assist 'un."

"Where did you want to go, sir?" asked Mrs. Leake.

"April Cottage," said the gentleman.

Cue, this, for Muriel. She hastened to the doorway. Who was this, then? What information did he require about April Cottage? By a long process of cross-interrogation, to which Mrs. Leake and the porter contributed, Muriel at last ascertained that the gentleman was after the stout lady who had accompanied the furious, shouting gent; while Willy groaned at the information that she had quitted the cottage for a destination unknown. He asked many other questions, which Mrs. Leake answered, only to be corrected by Muriel; and finally chafing at this promiscuous method of enlightenment, he tipped the porter and dismissed him; thanked Mrs. Leake, and decided not to trouble

her for a bicycle that night, and requested Muriel to show him the way to a respectable hostel.

"I'm going ther' myself, sir," said Muriel, readily. "I worrk ther'."

"Good heavens!" said Willy. "You seem to be an extraordinarily convenient sort of girl to run up against at night, in a strange town. Come along, then."

Mr. Plum opened rather an irritable front door for Muriel.

"Coom along, coom along with yer. Yer late, and ther's company. That dinner fer one, 'e's coom back, and a lady with 'e. Coom in."

Muriel indicated Willy. "Another of the parrty," she said; and, in an eager aside, to Willy, "They be here, sir."

"Who?"

"The leddy you want and the younger gentlem'n."

"What? Where are they?"

"They was in the lounge," said Mrs. Plum, "but I fancy he be gorrn to 'is room."

"Number fowerr," added Muriel.

"That's all right," said Willy. "I don't want him. Where is the lounge?"

"Oop ther', sir," said Muriel, and he hurried past the landlord, who waited to attack his handmaiden with a volley of querulous demands for enlightenment.

The lounge was unoccupied. Willy reappeared at the top of the first flight of stairs.

"Where's the lady's room?" he asked.

And Mr. Plum called testily back, "She aren't got one yet."

"Gosh!" muttered Willy to himself, staggered by his own half-formed suspicions. He paused to glance at

the doors on the first floor. Number 2. Number 3. . . . Yes, Four. He tried the door. It was unlocked. He went in.

Berty's spine had been duly embrocated, but he had neglected to replace his shirting, which hung in a dissolute fringe around his trousers. Louise had discovered a stiffness in her right knee, as a result of the embroilment of April Cottage, and this she was permitting Berty to inspect, it being difficult for one of her figure to determine for herself whether the joint was swollen.

Berty, a trifle preoccupied perhaps, found himself taken firmly by the ear and conveyed to the staircase, while Louise, overtaken by not the least of her night's surprises, and handicapped by the fact that one stocking had been pulled over one shoe, followed, as best she could and venting wild protest, in the rear of the procession.

At the foot of the stairs Willy transferred his grip from the ear to the collar and turned to address his wife.

"Go back to that room, and shut up. I'll be up there again in a minute."

"But, Willy—how dare you! How dare you follow me down here like this and behave like this? I'll . . ."

"You don't underst—— Let me expl——" said Berty.

"'Ere, 'ere, 'ere!" cried Mr. Plum, "I don't want to 'ave no trouble 'ere, ye know."

"And I damn well don't intend to," said Willy. "Open that door."

"But, look 'ere, sir . . ."

"Willy! That boy has already——"

"Here! Give me a chance, it's all a mist——"

"Open that door," repeated Willy.

"Oh, he's best away," said Muriel, and opened the door.

"Wull, by Jeremy," said Mr. Plum. "'E don't seem very popular to me. What's 'e done?"

Willy did not reply. Louise was still shouting. Berty was still protesting. Mr. Plum was helplessly questioning. Muriel was holding the door open.

Berty was hurtled forth in his flapping shirting. The door was slammed. He crept away—goodness knows where—into the unsympathetic night. His mission was over.

A somewhat pathetic, defenceless figure; but the weak are born to suffer in this hard world. His indignities were many; his one consolation, the fact that Willy's boot had landed rather below the bruised portion of his back.

But Berty Pitts had another consolation, out of this strenuous day's training for the church militant, in the long run. As he stood and tucked in his shirt in the courtyard of the Ring o' Bells, he decided finally and definitely that his friendship with the dear soul must cease. She was nice, but not nice enough to counterbalance the extreme nastiness of her male relations. And, after all, he reflected, he had never been really so fearfully keen on her as she on him. No. He was through.

He kept his vow. The first action that Louise performed on her return to London was to call at his address. He was out. She called again. He remained out. She wrote. He summoned up all his courage, and made no reply to her. She inserted a paragraph in

the personal column of *The Times*. "Dear Soul wants her boy back—not her fault." He didn't read *The Times*.

He even gave up attending St. Philip's. The last he ever saw of Louise was her right knee.

CHAPTER XX

SHADOW OF A FAIRY WING

"A WOMAN!" shouted Mr. Hole. "A woman!" There are not a few old gentlemen who, in Mr. Hole's case, would have uttered this exclamation rather as a shipwrecked mariner utters his exultant, "A sail! A sail!" Mr. Hole's tone was, however, more suggestive of the panic-stricken householder's, "Fire! Fire!"

"I wish you wouldn't come creeping in like that," said Eleanor. "You gave me quite a jump."

"What are you doing here?" demanded Mr. Hole.

"Minding my own business."

"Ah! That's just precisely what I thought," said Mr. Hole, and flung back into the sitting room.

This young rip of a nephew with a woman in his rooms! A good-looking strumpet—of course, that was to be expected. But to remain here, a butt for her cheek—unthinkable. And he could still hear the rain, and he was in poor health and already damp. And where the devil was he to go? Oh, blast this!

To his intense annoyance Phryne strolled after him into the sitting room.

"You needn't go," she said, "I'm not staying here, of course. You can use that room, if you want to."

"Thank you. You don't suppose I'm staying here, either, do you?"

"Why not?"

"That'll do," he rapped out, seating himself on the sofa and seizing a boot.

"Don't be so ridiculous," said Eleanor. "I don't think really we can either of us go out in this weather, so you'd better make the best of it."

He glared at her with red-rimmed eyes from the sofa.

"I would rather go out and walk through the rain than stay here with a woman," he said.

"What an extraordinary sentiment!" she replied. "Most men I know would gladly walk through the rain in order to get here."

"Oh, I daresay," said Mr. Hole.

"But then, of course, you're different, aren't you? I've heard of you. You're Algy's uncle, the woman-hater."

Mr. Hole, who was about to begin putting on his boot, paused and looked up again sharply.

"I am not a woman-hater," he said. "Nothing of the kind. I will not allow anybody to say that of me, because it gives an entirely false impression, and shows that the—that the person who says it hasn't got the gumption to make proper distinctions."

"You run women down, anyhow."

"Yes, and why? Because, in this God-forsaken community of ours to-day, a woman is neither educated up to the fulfilment of her prerogatives, nor would be content with them if she were."

He subsided with a grunt, annoyed with himself at having been decoyed into discussion with this mistress. "But I've no desire to continue the subject, thank yer," he added.

"Oh, but I have," she said; "it's very interesting. What are a woman's prerogatives?"

"I am not going to start arguing with you. The very fact of my finding you here like this——"

"You're trying to put the left boot on the right foot," said Eleanor, as, indeed he was.

"Kindly do not speak to me," he said. "I don't like it."

He placed one unsteady foot over a knee, and was in the throes of pulling on his sodden boot, when, in the most barefaced manner, this cool witch stepped forward and, before he could believe his eyes, glided back again toward the bedroom with his other boot. For a moment he could only stare; then attempted to master his anger and to speak with stern authority.

"None of those tricks with me! Give me my boot."

"If you think," she replied, with a slight assertive swaying of the head, "that you're going to come in here, to think the worst of Algy, to say the worst of me, and then to pop out again, you're very much mistaken, Mr. Hole."

"The boot!" he cried.

"I suppose you've never been about very much, since those stupid and immoral days when it was supposed to be improper for a girl to visit a friend in his room——"

"Will you give me the boot?"

"Presently," said Eleanor. "It's quite against a woman's principles to give a gentleman the boot while she's still got any use for him!"

She stood swinging the boot by the laces as she talked. The tormented old gentleman had perforce to sit with his hands on his knees, inattentive and snorting, but in her subjection.

"You'd better listen," she said, "because until I'm quite satisfied that you see the mistake you've made, I

can't possibly give you the boot. I owe it to Algy as well as to myself; or rather, you do."

She told him her name—Mrs. Bingham. She was a friend of Algy's, and had been dancing with him, thus fulfilling one at least of a woman's prerogatives—it being quite preposterous to suggest that men ought only to dance with each other. She had dressed—just as Mr. Hole had been hoping to undress—in Algy's room; and had now returned to collect her belongings before going home. Algy had gone on elsewhere, on receiving an urgent summons from a male friend. Some mission of charity, she understood. Would Mr. Hole now apologize and retract his insulting presumptions?

"My boot!" said Mr. Hole.

"I'm sure it would do you good to apologize for once in your life," said Eleanor. "There's no harm, I assure you, in a young man having a friend who is a married woman. It's only when a woman's married that she begins to be able to appreciate the difficulties that beset a young man."

She heard the voice of the guardian angel in her ear: "Oh, I say! Not that old chestnut. I don't think you can serve that up even to him." But this only made her rather more defiant. She raised her voice at Mr. Hole.

"You've entirely misunderstood me, and I resent it very much. I'm not only a friend of Algy's——"

"I can quite believe that," said Mr. Hole. "My boot!"

"I'm a friend of Diana's too."

"Eh?" said Mr. Hole, sharply.

"Yes. In fact, if you care to know, I've just returned from seeing Diana at your cottage. I slept last night

in your bed. So how do you like your eggs boiled now?"

"What! Who gave you permission to go to my cottage?"

"I went on my own. I heard Diana was lonely, and I'm not surprised, now I've seen the place."

Mr. Hole jumped up from the sofa.

"What has been going on at my cottage, then?" he cried. "Tell me. I demand to know."

"Going on? I should think it must be difficult to think of any place on earth where less is going on—except your nasty rooster. He goes on."

Mr. Hole stood before her, doing Zulu-dancing movements of disquietude.

"Answer my question. Something outrageous has been going on down there. I've been warned. Now, tell me at once."

"Warned?"

"Yes. You'd better tell me the whole truth. You've admitted you were there. When did you leave there?"

"This morning."

"Well? . . ." Mr. Hole fumbled at the dressing gown. "Oh, d—— Where did that quivering idiot of a man put my coat? Ah!" He snatched his coat from the back of the chair, where Lemon had placed it. From the breast pocket produced his dilapidated telegram.

"Kindly explain that to me," he said. "And you may just as well tell me the truth at once."

Eleanor dropped the boot gingerly, and took the telegram with a smile of curiosity. She read it aloud with increasing bewilderment and excusably faulty punctuation.

"'Cottage all upside down—now.' Now. Oh, I see—upside down now. 'Young man joined her double bed; got in yours. Out.' Got in yours? Out? 'Also.' Oh, out also—I don't—Oh! 'Also wine bought. Disgraceful behaviour undoubted easy.'"

She looked up, her brows knitted in perplexity. "Except for the last sentence, which seems to be a sort of general truism, the whole thing appears to me to be absolutely gibberish," she said. "Is it in a code or something?"

"Easy," explained Mr. Hole, watching her closely for any symptoms of masquerade, "is a name. The name of the sender; as you know, if you've been to the cottage."

"Oh! Yes. The charwoman that Diana sacked."

"What!"

"One moment, let's try again. 'Young man joined her.' Joined who, does that mean?"

"My niece, of course. You needn't try to——"

"Oh," said Eleanor. "I think I see daylight of sorts. 'Double bed got in—yours out'—yes. Easy, with her back up and trying to make mischief."

"Come on. What has she been doing, this niece of mine, tell me that," repeated Mr. Hole. "Who is this young man that has been to see her? It's no good shuffling. I shall find everything out."

"The young man was Algy."

"What? You needn't think that'll wash. Double bed?"

"I assure you Algy has been there. Diana, myself, and Algy."

"At my cottage?"

"Yes. Algy didn't sleep there. I slept there one

night in your bed and the double one came this morning."

"Oh, tell me the truth, girl!" cried Mr. Hole, almost beseechingly, in his weary anxiety.

Eleanor looked at him steadily, and with a faint smile.

"I've a good mind to tell you the whole story," she said.

"What? What?"

She turned to the sofa. "Come and sit down here again. You can take that other half boot off. You won't be going yet. You'd better take your socks off, too, if they're wet. I'll get you Algy's bedroom slippers."

"Certainly not! Leave me alone. I wish to hear ——"

"You shall hear everything. Take off your socks."

"I don't want slippers."

"You do want slippers," said Eleanor. "I dare say one could always tell a despiser of women by his feet."

She went into the bedroom, and returned in a minute with woolly footgear. Strange to say, Mr. Hole was awaiting her barefoot. She collected his boots and socks and laid them neatly aside.

"Thank you," he muttered, briefly. Then, Zuluing again on the sofa, "Now, the facts about my cottage?"

Eleanor came and sat beside him on the sofa. Her face was like that of a woman gazing into a mirror, and knowing that somewhere below that reflection lay her true self. She did not speak for a time, and the old man began almost to whine. "I'll tell you all about myself," she began, at last, only to be interrupted at the outset.

"I don't want to know about you. I want to know about the cottage and Diana."

"Diana and the cottage come in," said Eleanor. "I'll tell you everything in its turn. I don't suppose an ordinary person would sympathize much, but as you are like I am, rather a weird sort of being, it's just possible that you may understand me. It's rather a long story."

"Oh, go on, for God's sake," said Mr. Hole.

"Are you warm?"

"Yes, yes."

"Are you dry? I mean your exterior."

"Yes, yes. Will you——?"

"Then listen," said Eleanor.

She told him everything—everything to this queer old, petulant, inaffable, intolerant man—a strange confessor to choose. She was as frank and unbiassed as possible. She showed him herself—changeable, restless, pleasure-loving; a choice target for his vituperation. Her Reggy, on the other hand, must surely have impressed him as an ideal overlord. She told him of her marriage—Reggy got her, that was all, as he would get a hat. "Yes, I'll take that—how much?" And she was a willing purchase. No hint of Diana or April Cottage yet, but Mr. Hole sat scowling and listening rather intently.

Reggy's suspicions of her friendship for Algy—quite without foundation at the time. (Mr. Hole's eyes widened a trifle at this qualification.) Then, the whole story of this latest episode—this first episode—in her married life. Her motives, as she had found them, now good, now bad, during the last twenty-four hours. A regular shuttlecock between the devil (a smashing

wielder of the battledore) and the guardian angel (a neat placer) with Puck calling the score. That's what she had been, until the guardian angel had slipped one over out of the devil's reach, and that exponent of the game had thundered and retired in defeat. But would probably want another game before long.

Every detail she told—Diana, right in her surmise from the outset, if a bit previous in coming out with it, was completely justified. In fact, the only exaggeration that Eleanor was guilty of all through was a slight tendency to emphasize her eulogy of Diana. The whole story—she even told him where Algy had gone now. She felt a little glow of confidence, almost of tenderness radiating, as it were, from this funny, gruff old man. He said nothing, only occasionally gave her a frowning, attentive nod. She liked the way he listened—felt him warming to her, though his expression never lost its severity.

Finally, she rose and brought her note from the writing table, opened it and handed it to him. He frowned quickly through it; returned it to her. She took it back, and wrote another envelope for it, leaving it where it was before.

She sat again at his side on the sofa, as though awaiting his verdict. They remained thus in silence for quite a time. His first words were:

"My bed. Is at Pitcher's? She shouldn't have done that."

"Don't you worry," said Eleanor. "You'll find your cottage much straighter than you left it, I expect."

He growled away. "I don't want it straight. I——"

Having pondered for another minute, and arrived at the conclusion that his affairs were not, after all, so

disorganized as he had feared, he worked his eyebrows round at Eleanor.

"Why have you told me all this about yourself?"

She did not reply, but sat with clasped hands.

"Why?" he repeated, but not roughly.

"Well, I had to put Diana right with you, but—there was another reason besides."

"What was it?"

She shook her head. Her voice sank to a whisper. He saw tears mount to her eyes and her pretty throat quiver.

"Because—I don't know—I wanted to tell someone. I'm all—I'm all muddled in my life and unhappy and wrong, and—I don't know—I can't steer clear of mischief; and I don't think I want to."

"Mischief," repeated Mr. Hole, definitely; "yes. You're very young yet, I suppose."

"I believe it's the time of year, as much as anything else," said Eleanor, recovering her natural manner.

"The time of year my foot!" replied Mr. Hole. "That's no excuse."

"I don't want an excuse half the time," she said, "and that half is always the most enjoyable. I mean it though. I think it's much easier to fall into mischief at midsummer than at ordinary times. Don't you?"

"No," said Mr. Hole. "Fiddle!"

"Oh, I don't know," cried Eleanor. "June and Piccadilly, and the sort of thrill of summer days and nights."

"Yes; a nice summer day we've had to-day," said Mr. Hole.

"Ah, but don't you feel the sort of spirit of midsummer in your heart?"

"No, I do not," said Mr. Hole, "and I hate the heat."

"I know I nearly lost my head and went too far," said Eleanor, "but there is a good sort of mischief, too. Isn't there? Jolly, happy mischief. You must know that. Come on. You haven't been a grousing old misogynist all your life."

"Come on? What do you mean 'Come on'?" asked Mr. Hole, with a trace of alarm.

"I don't believe I'm really inclined to be a bad character. I believe the fairies have come out for their annual midsummer school-treat, and have been having a bit of a game with me. And now it's over, and I'm going home to my husband—by the skin of my teeth—but there it is."

"Oh, stuff!" said Mr. Hole. "You're simply a woman who is, I suppose, very attractive in the eyes of the average simpleton. Thanks to your social conditions, you've been given the opportunity to go astray, and you've very nearly taken it. You have thought better of it, I'll grant you that. But your behaviour throughout has been very dangerous and reprehensible. And it is outrageous bunkum to try and lay the blame on a fairy."

"I'm happier now, anyway," said Eleanor. "Telling you all about it has made me happier, you very grumpy and rather dear old thing."

"That'll do," said Mr. Hole, with a sniff, not entirely, perhaps, of distaste.

"Only I do want to be happy always—as happy as I can be with my nature—and with my husband's. They seem so different. But perhaps you say that a wife has no right to a nature of her own."

"Well, a husband must be reasonable," said Mr. Hole. "I've never denied that. Your gentleman sounds to me as if he could do with a lesson or two."

"Nobody can teach Reggy a lesson," said Eleanor.

"Then he must be a pig-headed fool!" cried Mr. Hole, flaring for the moment into his customary wrath. "There's no man on earth who can't afford to modify his opinions on occasion."

"Well, we all want a little sunshine as well as the rain, don't we?"

"What?"

"A little laughter with our tears," said Eleanor.

"Rain is very disagreeable, but very efficacious—so are tears. But, dash it, one must have some sunshine as well. My husband has no sunshine."

"Then give him some," said Mr. Hole.

She thought over this difficult task for a moment, then turned to him, lightly.

"I shouldn't think *you* enjoy an awful lot of sunshine," she said. "Shall I practise on you?"

"No, thank you. I don't require any more sunshine than I get."

"April Cottage," remarked Eleanor—"rather a wet April, I'm afraid."

"So much the better. More likely to be left to myself."

"I expect I could supply just the kind of sunshine you want. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Good heavens, what? Now, look here——"

"Don't be alarmed. I'm going home. I shall leave my things here till the morning, and call for them. And before I go, I'm going to exercise a woman's pre-

rogative. I'm going to tuck you up on this sofa, and send you off to sleep."

"Now, look here. I absolutely forbid——"

"A pillow," said Eleanor, and was up and in the bedroom before Mr. Hole could struggle to his feet. He stood and argued, protested, threatened, while she, with deft, long fingers, arranged his bed.

"That's it," she said. "Now, take your collar off and lie down."

He grudgingly ceased to refuse her and gave way. Confound her. He was quite ready to admit he was sleepy, but . . . .

She again returned from the bedroom with a blanket, and Mr. Hole, of Hole on "Woman," muttering an incoherent blend of gratitude and malediction, was tucked up.

"Now, just a nightcap," said Eleanor.

"No, I tell you; I don't want——"

"Yes, you do. A tiny liqueur brandy to send you to sleep feeling all cosy inside."

"I can't go to sleep yet. This young gambling rogue is at large, and may come dashing in with a dozen confounded policemen at his heels. . . ."

"Oh, don't you worry about him."

"I'm not. I'm worrying about myself."

"You won't be doing that for long," said Eleanor. "Now, take this."

"Oh—thank you. I don't suppose a little drop more will do any harm. I wish to goodness you wouldn't go on with this fussing and folly. Thank you. But it's ridiculous. I can't go to sleep yet."

"Well, you can read for a little while."

"Read! What is there fit to read in this feller's

bookcase? Besides, I can't see to read. It tries my eyes."

"Oh, then I shall have to read to you," said Eleanor.

"I absolutely decline——"

"Ssh. I'll turn this reading lamp on and switch the other off." She busied herself about the room. "There! It's got a nice red shade. How restful! Now, what would you like me to read?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Hole.

"He's got all sorts of nice books tucked away here. Poetry. I'll read you some poetry."

"You will do nothing of the sort. I dislike poetry very much."

"Shakespeare?"

"No. Poof!"

"Oh, well—Byron?"

"No. H'ngh!"

"Mrs. Hemans?"

"Oh, God!"

"Shelley?"

"H'm?"

"Lie down," said Eleanor.

"Oh, woman, I will not be bullied and commanded and read to."

"Lie down."

He growled a last remonstrance, and closed his eyes, nor opened them again that night. He felt, from the sound, that she must be sitting on the floor at his feet, and he thought he detected the gentle pressure of her head against the bottom of the sofa. But as soon, almost, as he allowed himself to court slumber, slumber clasped him into her tender arms.

Soon there came to him the sound of a voice sweetly

speaking words he used very dearly to love in younger, calmer days. He was conscious of them; unconscious; heard them in fitful murmurs; floated away on the wings of sleep to the sound of them!

"I love tranquil solitude,
And such society
As is quiet, wise and good;
Between thee and me
What difference? but thou dost possess
The things I seek, not love them less.

"I love Love—though he has wings,
And like light can flee.
But above all other things,
Spirit, I love thee—
Thou art Love and Life. . . ."

She stopped reading, and looked up from the page; turned slightly—just a sidelong tilt of her chin—toward the head on the sofa. You would pray for her not to laugh at this, her latest, quaintest conquest; for what could her laughter be now but derision, and the hard irony of the courtesan at her curtain?

But in her laughter there was a little tremble of the lip; and into the brightness of her eyes stole the tears again. Soft rain to kiss the sunshine.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SUNNY MORNING

THE rain had ceased by the time Algy got back to his rooms; so indeed had the night. The indigo-blue of a new and fairer dawn was in the sky. It was roughly the hour between sparrow-twitter and milk-clang.

He crept in very silently. Poor dear! what a vigil had been hers. Probably she had gone to sleep. He opened the sitting-room door without a sound. The red standard-lamp was burning. Yes, poor darling, she was curled up and asleep on the sofa.

He whispered affectionately, as he tiptoed forward, "Oh, my——"

Mr. Hole grunted loudly, and made a half-bouncing movement, as though sitting in a dream upon a pin. But he did not regain consciousness, possibly because the stifled cry of surprise which burst from Algy was exactly simultaneous with his own grunt.

Algy stood for some seconds, staring at his uncle in desperate bewilderment; then gaped at the bedroom door. It was ajar—Uncle must have been in there, or she—— But where was she? He stole into the bedroom. The curtains had not been drawn, and he could see at a glance that she was not there. What the devil had happened? Lemon? Was he about? He stealthily explored. Lemon was not about.

He took another furtive glance at Uncle, who had now rid himself of the dream-pin and was slumbering lustily. Presently, in the bedroom, Algy found Eleanor's luggage. She had packed her things, but left them. Her portmanteau and dressing case were beside his own, still unopened, bag. Had she managed to get out without Uncle finding her? That might be it. She had heard him come in, had quickly put away her belongings, and had crept out of the rooms. On the other hand, she might have left in tears of wrath, after a furious encounter. Well, he must wait till the old nuisance woke up. He'd soon learn the truth then.

Miserable sequel, anyhow, to a depressing experience. He had made his objective in good time, in spite of the storm. He had had to put his car up at a garage, and to walk to Shady Nook through the rain. Having arrived, he had found Mrs. Krabbe in winning vein, and she not only declined to leave the tables and come down and speak to him in the hall, but even when he went up to see her, could not be persuaded to grant him a few moments' privacy until her luck turned. She merely remarked aloud, "Oh, I suppose the husband turned up then?" and played on. She enjoyed a success which suggested that, however sinister had been the host's methods in dealing with Captain Dumfoil, he certainly lacked the courage to apply them in the case of Mrs. Krabbe. And she was playing baccarat with Mr. Phonk at the time.

When, at length, Algy succeeded in imparting his secret warning, she merely said, "Bless my life, is *that* all? Good of you to trouble to come, my dear; and I won't break faith with you, after what you promised that rotten stool-pigeon, but they won't be here till

twelve at the earliest. I'll just have another dip or two and then come along."

In vain Algy had reasoned. He was just on the point of leaving her to her fate, when Mr. Morris, of the Metropolitan Police Force, pulled up the blind in the lavatory, and it was too late.

The proceedings had been very protracted and irksome. Algy had succeeded in persuading them that he was not playing, and had escaped with a kindly Cockney lecture from an inspector; but Mrs. Krabbe had returned home with an appointment. "This has been a lesson to me," had been her parting words to Algy. "Never again. In future I shall have nothing to do with anything of that sort. I only went there out of patronage to Phonk, who backed a bill once for me when I was hard hit. But I've finished with that sort of business now. In future, I shall only go to one of those good-class places in Piccadilly."

Very weary was Algy, but he had no thought of sleep. He went to Lemon's pantry and boiled the ample kettle. Three kettles full, and he had quite a good hot bath in the making, though the making took a good deal of time. The hour of five was striking as he got into it.

Immediately—*B'rrrr!*

But he needn't have got out. He heard a raucous challenge from the sitting room.

"Who goes there?"

Before the ring had been repeated, or Algy had dried his legs, there was a sound of blanket-entangled upheaval and egress. "Oh, wait a moment—confound this thing all round my feet. Who are you, blast you, at this hour? Hold on."

Mr. Dawkins, in makeshift *déshabillé* and no melting

mood, had left Reginald to it, and gone downstairs again to air his grievances. The traveller returned, though his journeys had been accomplished in a very expensive and commodious car, was feeling, and showing, the effects. He had attempted to sleep in the car, and had awakened with a stiff neck. His collar had been like limp paper before he started, and he had covered well over two hundred and fifty miles since then.

He pulled his nose at Mr. Hole.

"You are the man here, what? Is your master here? Come."

Greek and Greek. Mr. Hole's back seemed to arch ominously. Algy remained, straining his ears, in the bathroom and the nude.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Mr. Hole.

"Stop that. You can't cockadoodle me. I know what I want."

"So do I," replied Mr. Hole, side-glancing furtively at a walking stick.

"Stand aside," said Reginald. "I'll look for myself."

"You'll look for yourself in the gutter," said Mr. Hole. "I asked you a question. Who the hell are you? Who the hell are you? Who—who—the hell—the hell——?"

Reginald nosed the passage from the front door.

"I intend to come in," he said. "I advise you not to try and stop me. I've come five hundred miles to do it, and——"

"Oho," cried Mr. Hole. "Damn my eyes, it's the husband."

Reginald's forefinger went up, like a terrier's ear.

"There you are. Out of your own mouth. They're here. Let me by."

"They're *not* here. I'm alone in the place. Oh, you can come in. You'd better. I've been hearing about you."

"What? Where is my wife? Who are you?"

"I'm this boy's uncle. I had the pleasure of spending part of the night with your wife. Then she tucked me up to sleep and went home."

"*You* here with her? Tucked! Explain yourself, sir. I insist on——"

"Don't stand and gobble there. Come in. I'm not going to stand repeating myself on a blasted doormat. I tell you, your wife has been here alone with me. And very attractive I found her. And I'm not partial to 'em as a rule. In you come."

He piloted the baffled Reginald into the sitting room. Algy, robbed of his dressing gown, girt up his loins as best he could and advanced very cautiously into the bedroom.

Mr. Hole stumped to the writing table.

"Now then, you see this letter?" He held it up. "Recognize the writing?"

"Give it to me," said Reginald.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Hole. "It isn't addressed to you. You notice whom it is addressed to? Yes. Now I'll tell you something."

He placed the letter in the pocket of the dressing gown, and sat deliberately on the sofa.

"That letter," he went on, "is a letter of renunciation. She told me all about it. At the start, she only wanted to have what these young people look on as a bit of fun. Dancing, and such-like. She seems to get a fat lot of fun out of you! Don't you interrupt now. You can talk when I've done, if you want to."

He paused to yawn. Reginald was standing in a tense attitude, and now firmly gripping the end of his nose, as though he found that, while of compelling interest, Mr. Hole smelt.

"Before long," continued the latter, "she found herself being driven into danger. It may not be for me to say who seems to have done most of the driving. But when she got to the danger, she stopped in time. Not an easy thing for a woman to do, I think. A damned unusual thing, anyhow. It's easy enough to repent, but it's a tough job to stop in time, even for a man. But she did—she stopped. This boy has been out somewhere else all the night—gone to look after his aunt who's in trouble. So she stayed here with me for a bit, and then went home. And she wrote him that letter; she showed it to me. A simple, natural letter, offering to keep up her friendship with him, but only her friendship. I can't altogether blame the boy for being dangerously attracted. Even I was young once, and she's—well, she's the wife of a singularly lucky husband, I consider."

"You," said Reginald, "you stopped this, I can see."

"Nothing of the sort. She stopped herself. That letter was written before I ever saw her. She was just off home when I came in here. Only waiting for the rain to stop. And if you're a sensible man, you'll follow her very shortly. However, I don't wish to dictate what you should do, but it may interest you to know that I, who have written a work of rather more than one million, five hundred thousand words on the subject of Woman, am very deeply impressed by her—qualities."

Reginald heaved out his great chest. He seemed

to be on the point of challenging the right of any man to pay compliments to his wife. After a moment's reflection, he contented himself with a nod and a curt acknowledgment.

"Thank you. Yes. I shall go home at once."

"Well, find your own way out, will yer? I want to go to sleep again," said Mr. Hole.

Beautiful dawned the day at South Ditherton. The sun was streaming in through the window of Number 4 bedroom when Muriel climbed the staircase of the Ring o' Bells with the eight-o'clock tea. At her knock, Louise sat up with a little cry, and instinctively elbowed Willy.

"The girl with the tea. Get up and unlock the door, but don't go and say 'Come in,' before you've got back into bed."

"Hallo! What?" asked Willy, raising a sleepy head.

"Don't forget you have no pyjamas with you, and have taken your trousers off."

A new light seemed to dawn with increasing consciousness over Willy's expression.

"Now then; not so much of it," he replied, suddenly. "You can get out and open the door yourself. You've got your petticoat on."

"Oh," said Louise, gently. And she, too, seemed to recollect something. "Very well, dear; yes. I'll see to it."

She began to climb out of bed.

"Oh, be blowed to all that," cried Willy. "It's all right, old girl. I'll get out."

Louise got back with a demure little, "Very well. Only, if you meant what you said last night. . . ."

"No, no, no; that's all right," said Willy, and plunged happily out of bed and into subjection again.

Sunshine, too, at April Cottage. A gentle rap on the bedroom door and anxious enquiries.

"Come in," said Henry. "Good morning, good morning. What a lovely day! Did you sleep?"

"Did you?"

"Not so bad. Oh, tea! That *is* kind. I can do with some tea. I've got a slight throat this morning, but I don't think it's anything much, and I'm going to an infirmary in any case. I wish you were going, too. At least—you know what I mean?"

"I expect my uncle will be coming back soon," said Diana. "I might come and look you up at Downblotton. Shall I?"

She was handing him his tea. A sentimental smile beamed on his round face. He took and held her hand, instead of the cup.

"It will save me a journey if you do," he replied. "Oh, curse! I beg your pardon, but I've spilt some hot tea on my hand."

But before this—before Louise and Willy and Henry and Diana and Muriel fluttered an eyelid between them—Eleanor, having silently stolen back into her own house with her own key, went to bed, and lay there, very tired but drowsily watchful, until long after daybreak. Then she fell asleep, but not for long. For she awoke again at half-past five, to sit up in bed suddenly with a little "Oh!"

Reginald remained stationary at the foot of the bed. His chins were in evidence.

"Hallo, Reggy!" she said. "I—— Oh, I am so glad. I heard you'd come home."

"You," he said, "have also done that apparently."

"Well, of course. I don't want to be anywhere else now you're back again. Oh, Reggy! I'm so glad to see you again. Why should I want to be anywhere else?"

Reginald, the pompous extremist, overdid it, of course.

"You shall go," he said, "where you like, when you like, and with whom you like."

Eleanor slowly opened her eyes. This sounded unexpectedly propitious for Reggy.

"You have absolute liberty to do whatever you desire, with my full consent, and not only with my full consent, but also with my full approval and confidence, because I know that you will only do the things that are right. And if Louise ever attempts to make mischief between us again, by Christopher, I'll——"

"Oh, it wasn't Louise's fault."

"Yes, it was. Of course, I am ready to admit that, to a certain extent, I was rather to blame. . . ."

"What about me?" said Eleanor.

"You? No. Not at all. You might have been, but you—you stopped."

"What?"

"Oh, yes; I've heard all about it."

"Oh-h!" It dawned on Eleanor. "Have you been along to Half Moon Street?"

"Yes. I—ah—I know I ought to have had greater faith in you." He cut this short. He found apology very uncongenial.

"Oh, that's all right," answered Eleanor. "I didn't

deserve much faith in me. I very nearly—— You met the uncle, I suppose?"

"I did."

"I see," said Eleanor. "Oh, well, Reggy—it's over—all over, and no harm done. I disobeyed you, and you distrusted me. If you're prepared to call it quits . . ."

He assaulted a bed post.

"Sto— Don't, please, talk like that. I did not come here for bargaining and inquests. I came here for complete reconciliation and—ah—a fresh start."

"Righto," said Eleanor. "And a little more ordinary common or garden humanity, Reggy darling. Just the teeniest bit less solemnity and self-importance. And now, come and give me a kiss."

He obeyed—a hearty, resounding, slovenly business, which she did her best to appreciate.

"I know I'm not like other men," he said.

"That's the last thing I want you to be," said Eleanor.

He pulled his nose.

"Yes," he added. "For one thing, I rather think I can claim to be more successful than the herd."

"Yes, but there's one thing you want that you haven't had enough of up to the present. I'll try and see that you get it in future."

"H'm? What?"

"Chaff," said Eleanor.

He took it kindly, with arched eyebrows and an unctuous, wrinkling smile.

"Ho! Will you, indeed?"

Pinched her cheek and went to put on his pyjamas.

Mr. Hole, quite his old self, snarling, eyebrow-working, choleric, completed a savage verbal onslaught which failed to have any marked effect on Algy, who suffered it with a pertly waving cigarette, as he sat at his table. His uncle was erect on the sofa, but still involved in blanket about the legs.

"All very well, Uncle," remarked Algy, "but I'm not sure you haven't had a bit of a reminder yourself."

"I? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I know you're very clever and prejudiced and self-reliant and all that, but you know, there's something no man can really get along without."

"What the devil are you talking about, boy? What thing?"

"Why——"

Algy broke off, and turned his head sharply.

"What thing?" repeated Mr. Hole. "Come along, now. What is it?"

There was a confused scuffling sound in the passage outside. Then Lemon, heated, dishevelled, but triumphantly, burst beaming into the room, carrying his bowler hat.

"Oh, sir!" he cried. ,'Oh, sir!"

"Hallo, Lemon! What is it?"

"It's a girl," said Lemon.

THE END